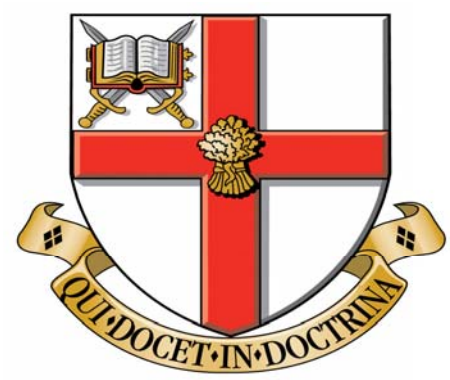

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‘The Matrix of All Problems’

Stephen King’s Marriage of Fundamentalism and the Monstrous-Feminine as Social Critique

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Abstract

The place of women in society has long been decried by their place in religion – at least according to horror novelist Stephen King. Indeed, the release of first novel *Carrie* (1974) was the beginnings of an avid interest in both religion and gender stereotyping, the latter of which the author has been accused of utilising for horrific effect. Yet, this unison of themes is more complex than this. Certainly, these thematic concerns become the means with which King interrogates religious extremism and the conditions which cultivate such devotion; the novel succeeded in exposing the cataclysmic aftermath of a childhood so governed and restricted by militant Puritanism as to metamorphose Carrie White from a wholesome, all-American teen into an ardent evangelist responsible for a town massacre and the murder of her mother. However, utilisation of the fundamentalist agenda within this novel and later releases becomes the means with which King critiques both the archaic notions of the sin of femininity upheld within Christianity, and crucially, how and why such conceptions still pervade modern-day culture. In particular, King turns 'his women' monstrous because of their adherence to roles placed upon them by the conservative – even oppressive – conception of gender found within fundamentalist discourse; monstrous when they succeed in following such ideals – and monstrous when they do not – King also suggests that the origins and perpetuation of the image of the monstrous-feminine are far more sewn into the fabric of US society than its citizens would care to admit. This study will thus focus upon the methods of control found within fundamentalist ideology and how they presume to demarcate boundaries which dictate appropriate behaviour for women. Analyses of the monstrous-feminine within later novels will also demonstrate King's motivation for marrying religion and the woman-as-horror scenario, and will be highlighted as not simply a mechanism within King's oft-used toolbox of terror, but as the mechanism with which he turns the spotlight on both fundamentalism - and an avidly patriarchal society still struggling to maintain a hold over women.

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Introduction

'[Readers must understand] the strength of the tie between fundamentalism and a conservative ideology of gender'.[1]

Since the release of *Carrie* (1974), Stephen King has struggled to transcend a labelling of his fiction as inherently misogynistic. His position as a mainstay of the horror genre has seen him frequently re-tread the thematic ground covered in his first novel which, for some critics, ushered in the beginnings of a prolific authorial career which has been marred by an inability to represent women realistically. Indeed, John Sears states that '*Carrie* establishes at the outset of King's ouvre an unsettling and problematic construction of femininity to which he repeatedly returns but which he fails to adequately resolve'.[2] Yet, this problematic construction rests on King's use of the feminine as a source of horror. Tapping into universal fears that resonate in us all, the mechanics of what makes small-town America tick, tremble and spew has unashamedly occupied a large proportion of King novels – and yet, if King's canon utilises 'national phobic pressure points', which 'play upon and express fears which exist across a wide spectrum of people',[3] then we are all undoubtedly terrified of the feminine.

This image of femininity as horror has provided fuel for the likes of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, who finds it 'disheartening when a writer with so much talent and strength and vision is not able to develop a believable woman character between the ages of seventeen and sixty.'[4] Yet, while it is superficially difficult to dispute King's troubling depiction of women, it is crucial that none of his critics have, thus far, undertaken an approach which marries some

[1] John Stratton Hawley and Wayne Proudfoot. 'Introduction' in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1992), p. 4.
[2] John Sears, *Stephen King's Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 31.
[3] Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Hodder, 2012) p. 19.
[4] Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, "Cinderella's Revenge: Twists on Fairy Tale and Mythic Themes in the Work of Stephen King' cited in *Fear Itself: The Early Works of Stephen King*, ed. Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (San Francisco: Underwood-Miller, 1993), pp. 45-56, in Sharon Russell, *Stephen King: A Critical Companion* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 59.

of his most obvious thematic preoccupations. The 'other' as source of fear and paranoia, for example, features in every King novel and while the author is clearly intent on exposing the varying facets of 'otherness' which exist in modern-day culture, he is truly only drawn to one conception of such. He thus produces a 'Gothic [that] is ideologically constrained by a failure to transcend a gendering of that 'otherness', a reduction of the monstrous 'other' to a feminine coded figure of specifically masculine anxiety'.[5] However, this feminine 'other' is so often united with an interrogation of one of the biggest institutions which informs the modern-day US psyche; the conspicuous inclusion of religion in King novels – though inextricably linked to how and why we label the feminine as 'other' – is a neglected area of criticism that this study will attempt to address.

Indeed, *Carrie* was the beginnings of King's avid fascination not simply with the monstrous-feminine, but with the monstrosity inherent in ideological subscription to religious causes which promise love and light but in fact, spread alienation and confusion. We must recognise that, while *Carrie* may have been instrumental in reinforcing misogynistic portrayals of the feminine that rely heavily upon innate disgust towards the female body and its functions, the novel is also intrinsic in establishing at the outset of King's career an exposure of the dangers of religious fundamentalism. Menstruation as horror, for example, is one of the core premises upon which King addresses expectations of the feminine and the disgust which ensues when these are subverted; yet, the very suggestion that menstrual blood should remain 'within'[6] is tied irrevocably to biblical and patriarchal tradition. Carrie's shame over her public menstruation is a direct result of her mother's strict fundamentalist beliefs which have disallowed her from educating Carrie on this natural event which introduces her to womanhood. Instead representative of the 'sin' of the feminine, the

[5] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 12.
[6] Clare Hanson, 'Stephen King: Powers of Horror' in *American Horror Fiction: From Brockden Brown to Stephen King*, ed. Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 48.

embarrassment we experience as readers for Carrie's public menarche is tied exclusively to the patriarchal and biblical ideal which suggests this should remain concealed. From the outset, then, a relationship is established between this overt display of the 'monstrous' feminine and her origins within religious condemnation towards the perceived sin of womanhood.

By repeatedly branding the 'other' a specifically masculine source of fear and anxiety which is always gendered feminine, we see King replicate one of the core tenets of the fundamentalist agenda. As the specific branch of religious extremism to which King repeatedly returns, it is certainly significant that 'many fundamentalist groups – that is, their leaders, fundamentalist men – believe that there is a necessity for maleness to reassert itself in the face of manifest threat'.[7] Thus archaic ideas about woman's place as 'other' are reiterated through her biblical status, in which she straddles the boundaries between God's ideal and the ultimate sinner. Therefore, even a cursory glance at fundamentalist ideology would perhaps explain King's frequent visitation of horror upon women via religion, and may have ensured that some of his critics exercised more caution before dismissing him as incapable of 'portraying women realistically'.[8] Indeed, if 'fundamentalists are American Protestants with a militant desire to defend religion against the onslaughts of modern, secular, culture',[9] this militant championing of an anti-modernist stance ensures that social conceptions of women too regress. The modern-day career woman is consequently rebuffed as the antithesis of God's ideal, and consigning women solely to the domestic sphere (with the care of their husband and children forming the sole fabric of their days) is the key method with which the 'manifest threat' posed by the female sex is curbed and detained. Thus 'for every [fundamentalist] text that places well-domesticated women on a pedestal, another one

[7] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 32.
[8] Sharon Russell, *Stephen King: A Critical Companion* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 59.
[9] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 3.

announces that, if uncontrolled, women are at the root of all evil'.[10] King has clearly done his research, then. His unison of the monstrous-feminine alongside extreme devotion to an ideology that seeks to control and dominate women is in fact a critique (under the supposedly frivolous horror genre umbrella) of two of the most predominant discourses that still prevail within the modern Western psyche: the place of women and the place of religion.

For fundamentalists, women occupy an elevated role founded upon the sacred bond of mother and child; yet, because synonymous with the 'sin' of intercourse, this very bond in the same breath evokes condemnation towards the wickedness of femininity implied in Eve's 'fall'. Layered upon this is our comprehension of a further dichotomy attached to the role of mother, in place before birth. If 'the sense of [the mother's] presence […] is what makes the world feel safe',[11] a desire to return to a simpler time automatically links the past to mother and comes to the fore via the shunning of modernity that fundamentalists insist upon. However, the conditions upon which the mother/child bond is cultivated – and upon which our earliest conceptions of safety are built – are the very same conditions which, according to Kristevan theory, the body summons when we experience fear.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection can be applied – somewhat confusingly – to both our primordial understanding of safety, and the core premise upon which horror is founded, a dichotomy frequently evoked by King. Abjection is the innate process upon which borders and boundaries are first formed to distinguish between safety and danger (and, indeed, life and death) that are intrinsic to survival. The mother is the first object to be abjected in order that survival ensues. 'In the time before the presence of an ego secures the boundaries of our

[10] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', pp. 27-8.
[11] Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 131 cited in 'Fundamentalism and the Control of Women', Karen McCarthy Brown in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 181.

individuality',[12] our understanding of mother as a potential source of harm is the earliest form of comprehension which distinguishes between self and other: 'the abject confronts us […] with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her'.[13] Crucial to this jettisoning of the mother is the primal understanding of a dichotomy attached to the female; what instils a sense of security in us as infants is also what inspires fear (towards our vulnerability to harm in mother's arms and, contradictorily, the fear she will be removed). Therefore, 'fear of female will' as 'the earliest and profoundest prototype of absolute power'[14] is the foundations upon which our sense of general fear is built. Via horror, then, King returns us to this innate conception of our own vulnerability. Ronald T. Curran agrees, stating that King employs many of the conventions of the genre specifically to:

> Take the reader back into the archaic world of childhood where magical thinking precedes ego defence, when parental power was both fantastic and absolute […] to conjure again those anxieties in childhood, the times when we felt the threat of being overwhelmed, abandoned, and annihilated.[15]

This horror – always irrevocably attached to the maternal because of the above connection – is more profoundly felt by the male,[16] and control must thus be asserted in order that women remain in their God-given position as subservient to men. Therefore, King is arguably keen to expose such control as being the root cause of woman's apparently innate monstrosity; by turning women monstrous *because of* their adherence to restrictions placed upon them by

[12] Ronald T. Curran, 'Complex, Archetype, and Primal Fear: King's Use of Fairy Takes in *The Shining*' in *The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horrorscape*, ed. Tony Magistrale (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 33.
[13] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 13.
[14] Karen McCarthy Brown, 'Fundamentalism and the Control of Women' in *Fundamentalism and* Gender, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 181.
[15] Curran, 'Complex, Archetype and Primal Fear', p. 33.
[16] According to Freudian analysis, the male views the female as a 'defunct' and incomplete form of himself and, consequently, a symbol of the possibility of castration. For an excellent discussion on the ramifications of this ambivalence within the horror genre, see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

society and fundamentalism, King ensures we critique this external influence. Such methods of control as the grounds for this monstrosity will form the basis of this study.

Echoed in the chapter structure is the three main arenas of control exerted by patriarchy and its replication within the 'conservative ideology of gender'[17] that defines fundamentalism; such facets of control are inextricably linked but an attempt has been made to deal with each on an individual basis. Chapter One will examine King's motivations behind attaching agency to the domestic setting; 'home as horror' is possible because of our innate comprehension of woman as horror, which King explores via his construction of this feminine domain as working both with and against the female. Within fundamentalism, a desire to return to an innocence which is unsullied by modernity is the reason why this religion, 'more than most, capitalizes on the strength of the connection between religion and childhood'.[18] Yet, for men, this desire is a double-edged:

> On the one hand, a positive appropriation is made of the undemanding amorphousness that serves as a grounding for childhood. This is represented in the soft contours of Home and Mother. On the other hand, the same amorphousness elicits fear, since it is associated with the ill-understood opposite sex. Such fear is often expressed as horror.[19]

Much like the feminine herself, the domestic is therefore seen to straddle several boundaries - between help and hindrance, between freedom and oppression and crucially, between safety and danger. Assisting in her monstrous role while seeking to detain her in the same holds, Chapter Two's concern with motherhood inevitably follows on from this. Again depicting conformity (or lack of) as the true issue for women, King ensures that unwavering adherence to the fundamentalist agenda is the means with which to critique the archaic and outdated conceptions of women that still circulate. The centrality of motherhood in defining female

[17] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[18] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 31.
[19] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', pp. 31-2.

identity is exposed via the damaging consequences of 'smother-love'; clinging tightly to this role as their sole identity, our mothers subvert the purpose of their love by metamorphosing into a source of harm for their child. Chapter Three's examination of the female body as a source of horror is bound up with the aforementioned 'sole identity'. The concept of abject horror is laced throughout this study, but Chapter Three's analysis details the root cause of ambivalence towards the figure of the feminine as resting upon our relationship with our bodies and how we seek to control it. Monstrous because undertaking exactly what is expected of them, but monstrous when this slips, flaws are exposed not simply in how we are taught as a society to view women, but what we are taught to fear.

Fundamentalists in the literal sense appear frequently in King, but there are two of real note. *Carrie*'s Margaret White and *The Dead Zone*'s Vera Smith are so zealously religious that their identities are defined by their devotion. Our introduction to Vera is via her son Johnny's summation of her as 'as Baptist as you can get'.[20] 'Ghastly' (p. 71) in her devotion, Vera's faith is her defining characteristic, with James Egan noting that '[her] religious predilections have become the dominant features of her personality'.[21] Margaret White, too, is defined by others via her 'near fanatical religious beliefs'.[22] Our introduction to her character is from an excerpt of *The Shadow Exploded*,[23] where we learn of the neighbours' latent dislike for her, fuelled by the knowledge that Margaret had given birth to Carrie at home because of the shame she felt towards the ''sin' of intercourse' (she had even proceeded to 'cut the umbilical cord herself with a knife' (p. 326)). Throughout the novel,

[20] Stephen King, *The Dead Zone* (London: Futura, 1979), p. 31. All further references will be given in the body of the text.
[21] James Egan, 'Sacral Parody in the Fiction of Stephen King', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 23 (1989), p. 126.
[22] Stephen King, *Carrie* in Stephen King, *The Shining*, *Carrie*, *Misery* (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), p. 326. All further references will be given in the body of the text.
[23] This is purported to be a published account of Carrie's upbringing, telekinetic ability and the resultant town massacre. King is very fond of utilising the epistolary form as a means with which to embellish his novels with what are perceived to be 'factual' accounts of incidents from newspapers, diaries and other textual forms. Carrie's tale, for example, is rendered both more clinical and sensational because of the inclusion of reports from the White Commission and Susan Snell's published account of events.

Margaret is categorised as insane via her devotion, 'embod[ying] many fundamentalist clichés and their destructive consequences'.[24] Moreover, while 'bloodied images of Sissy Spacek adorning video covers, movie posters and book reprints'[25] have imbued our cultural understanding of both Brian De Palma and King's creations, the audio-visual effects used when Margaret appears on screen are intrinsic to our understanding of *Carrie* as proposing a form of horror attached to extreme religious devotion.[26] Vera and Margaret are therefore key to King's exploration of the fundamentalist agenda and the monstrous-feminine; explicitly under the influence of manic religious zeal, they have been selected for this study as two of the most atypical fundamentalists in King's large repertoire of such.

Although some of King's novels overtly pivot around female devotion, others are laced with a more subtle message. For example, *Misery*'s Annie Wilkes, though a Christian,[27] constructs her own God and religion in the form of writer Paul Sheldon and his fictional creations. If Vera and Margaret demonstrate their devotion by 'read[ing] to tatters'[28] various magazines related to their faith, Annie consumes the Misery Chastain series as her very own religious pamphlets and tracts. As the repetition of her status as Paul's 'number one fan'[29] makes clear, Annie is under the influence of an extreme form of fanaticism which casts Paul as God. Mimicking what Sears defines as the 'assumptions about authorial power critiqued by Roland Barthes in The Death of the Author',[30] King has himself commented on the God-like nature of authorial creativity: 'being a writer is sort of a Godlike function, in a way, and

[24] Egan, 'Sacral Parody', p. 127.
[25] Mark Browning, *Stephen King on the Big Screen* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 35.
[26] In particular, the ominous soundtrack and use of imagery that connotes a witch-like presence when Margaret White is on screen (evident in her long black billowing cloak that forms one of our first visual encounters with her) are crucial in delivering this understated form of horror.
[27] Director Rob Reiner visually emphasises this through repeated close-ups of Annie's crucifix necklace and the utilisation of more overtly religious language and imagery to capture a sense of Annie's faith, which although never explicitly labelled or addressed, permeates our understanding of Annie's character as in possession of traditional and orthodox views, with an unwavering belief in God: Rob Reiner (dir.), *Misery* (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1990).
[28] King, 'The Dead Zone', p. 80.
[29] Stephen King, *Misery* in Stephen King, *The Shining, Carrie, Misery* (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), p. 460. All further references will be given in the body of the text.
[30] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 128.

that's kind of fun'.[31] It is therefore significant when Annie insists that 'a writer is God to the people in the story, he made them up just like God made US up' (p. 469). Annie here likens Paul's construction of fictional characters to God-like creation, and even struggles to criticise the detested *Fast Cars* manuscript because of its divine origins ('who am I to make a criticism to someone like you?').[32] Even Paul understands the significance of her sacrificing the manuscript: 'images of the blackened pages […] the smell of the uncreation' (pp. 481-2). Annie also insists he make right the cheat in *Misery's Return*, betraying how she truly feels towards the Misery books; she takes the novels literally and all details must sit well and be perceived as 'fair' (p. 519). Annie's attitude is such that the characters appear to *live* (clear in her dismay at Misery's death). Thus her devotion to the texts can be likened to a fundamentalist adherence to scripture; if the Misery series is Annie's scripture, she must believe in its inerrancy – the knowledge of a perceived 'cheat' from Paul would expose its fictional nature and hence, cannot be tolerated.

Clearly, Annie is in awe of Paul and his writing talent; proud of him in a manner akin to the pride displayed by a mother towards her child's achievements, Annie's role as 'mother' is crucial, whereupon her devotion to this identity literally kills her. Many of King's fundamentalist women cause harm via 'smother-love' and this is certainly applicable to both Annie and Wendy Torrance of *The Shining*. Defined solely by her role as mother and ruthless in her defence of Danny, Wendy is crucial in defining King's monstrous-feminine tropes as social critique. Though not a fundamentalist in the strictest sense, Wendy has thus been selected alongside Annie as two more subtle examples of King's agenda. Smaller references to other King texts, where relevant, are interspersed throughout the study. It is also crucial to

[31] 'Stephen King Interview' in *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds. T Underwood and C. Miller (Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 121, in *Stephen King's Gothic*, John Sears (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 128.
[32] This line is only present in the film, but is insinuated throughout the text through Annie's insistence upon the divinity of the *Misery* series.

note that, while fundamentalism relies upon a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, this is also – contradictorily – open to much interpretation. For King at least, it is the interpretation of the Bible which is crucial, and not the Bible itself; thus no literal references will be made within this study.

Therefore, while the unwavering presence of those determined to find fault with 'King's women' are difficult to deter, this study is keen to tread the lesser-explored path; if, 'in the English Departments that once derided him, earnest dissertations are now being written about his vision of post-secular America',[33] this study is undoubtedly one of them. Seeking to usher in a rehabilitative process which sees him afforded – at least in part – the critical integrity he deserves, King's construction of the monstrous-feminine will be exposed as irrevocably imbued into an American society which readily accepts the fundamentalist agenda. Culpability for King's fuelling of the monstrous-feminine image can in fact be placed within Western culture – and not on King himself.

[33] Sam Sacks, 'The Highbrow Lowbrow', *Commentary*, 129 (2010), p. 69.

Chapter One

Home as Horror: The Fundamentalist Household

'*This inhuman place makes human monsters*'.[34]

Readers of *The Shining* will find it difficult to dispute Danny Torrance's summation of the Overlook Hotel; the uncanny expansion of the domestic setting inherent in the hotel environment provides a powerful subversion of those emotions we associate with the comfort, safety and contentment of home. In *Misery*, too, Annie's home is so corroborative to our understanding of her as a source of horror as to ensure difficulty in separating her from the domestic setting in which she detains Paul; the transformation of the safe haven of the home exacerbates our impression of Annie as the ultimate subversion of the female care-giver role. In King's first novel, we also find the White House transformed from a safe abode to a place of extreme unhappiness for Carrie, who, instead of retreating to her house as respite from the daily cruelty she endures, faces worse challenges in the place she should feel safest. Indeed, it cannot be disputed that the treatment of the home and mother-figure found in *Carrie* was instrumental in establishing the domestic and maternal as core components of King's delivery of horror. Though not original in utilising the house-as-horror formula, King takes this further than other authors, with Sears stating that 'in King's Gothic, place is an aspect or a face of the '"inhuman", […] in its most powerful forms it works to transform the human into the monstrous'.[35] In many King novels, then, readers find a form of agency within the home; such a setting often works in collaboration with other forces of evil to render the home truly horrifying and, too, exacerbate our impression of its residents as monstrous.

The domestic setting has long been conducive to tales of horror within the Gothic tradition *because* it is the female's domain. Confined here, she becomes the ever-present hub

[34] Stephen King, *The Shining* (London: Hodder, 2007), p. 216. All further references will be given in the body of the text.
[35] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 165.

of the family and is perceived to have full control, though must 'demand no voice of authority'.[36] Such 'freedom' thus masks the oppression and isolation inherent in women's experience, with Maggie Kilgour asserting that: 'the result of such conditioning is shown in many gothic novels […] in which female sensibility is enflamed by domestic repression until it becomes murderous.'[37] Kilgour's argument is extremely applicable to the experiences of King's women. The home also becomes a prison for woman too, in which she is drawn to view the home as the only place she belongs. Beneath the surface, however, King utilises the home-as-horror formula for ulterior purposes. Offering a form of resolution for the Gothic's stagnant portrayal of women, King instead makes the feminine monstrous and grotesque through their homes – the very domains they have been traditionally assigned. Playing on our innate comprehension of the home as ambivalent site of safety and danger because belonging to mother, the homes in King's canon are monstrous through the agency they assert in collaboration with and against the female. When collaborating with her, the female struggles to break away from her monstrosity – and yet, when working against her, she cannot leave and is perpetually assigned to a dominion in which she will always be controlled. Situating our ambivalence towards the figure of the female and the domestic within its social construction is thus a critical component of King's agenda.

In his first novel, King lays the groundwork for the exposure of the monstrous-feminine as a product of strict adherence to religious ideals, and conceptions of the 'sin' of womanhood permeates the everyday lives of the women in *Carrie.* The home as the enforced domain of the female in which religion and patriarchy can circumscribe their ideals is enforced via Carrie's experience, particularly with reference to the closet. With queer theorists challenging 'the closet' as the appropriate dwelling place for homosexual identity,

[36] Randall Balmer, 'American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity' in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 49.
[37] Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.78.

and feminists attempting the same for the domestic scene for women, it is significant that the closet functions in *Carrie* on both fronts; as both a means of curtailing Carrie's womanhood and – though it is never implied that she is homosexual – her burgeoning sexuality, definitively 'closeted' via her mother's insistence upon the repression of sexual appetite. This is often made manifest via a literal 'closeting' in the cupboard so that Carrie can pray for her sins – tellingly, 'in secret' (p. 346). Margaret clearly associates sexual desire as a form of identity which is at odds with her militant religious views (which, in conjunction with the possession of 'dirty pillows', will not be given to 'good girls' (p. 334)). Margaret thus mirrors Michel Foucault's categorisation of sexual behaviour as typifying an identity. For Foucault, homosexual acts specified an identity which should remain concealed and hidden,[38] and Margaret acts against the concept of an unappealing identity to repress Carrie's femininity (and, interchangeably, her sexuality) within the closet.

If the closet functions as a place of guilt and shame for homosexuals, Carrie's 'closet', too, is synonymous with the shame she experiences when she sins – most notably after she is punished for her first menstruation, which for Margaret represents the beginning of a process that culminates in sexual activity and therefore, sin. Stating 'first the blood, then the power' (p. 390) Margaret connects Carrie's telekinetic ability with the onset of puberty. Brian De Palma's film makes more explicit the connection between blood and sexual desire with Margaret's repetition of the line 'first the blood, then the boys' as she drags her daughter to the closet.[39] Carrie's terror over the prospect of imprisonment in the closet – and its resultant call to suppress sexual appetite – is evident when she views 'to the right […] the worst place of all, the home of terror, the cave where all hope, all resistance to God's will – and Momma's – was extinguished' (p. 345), a description that also embodies the White House

[38] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 105.
[39] Brian de Palma (dir.), *Carrie* (United Artists, 1976).

itself. Moreover, the closet's position as a motif of sexuality is made more apparent by the fact that 'the closet door leered open' (p. 345), signifying Carrie's ensuing emergence into womanhood. The closet thus becomes a microcosm of the White House itself, representing in miniature form the arena of retribution in the eyes of God that Mrs White insists upon: 'she was alone with Momma's angry God' (p. 347).

Despite learning that the female identity is inherently sinful, the closet is where Carrie embraces her identity as woman and sexual being. Yet, she is made monstrous through the connection between this identity and her telekinetic ability. King connects Carrie's supernatural power with the closet and her mother's fear of Carrie's forthcoming status as woman and her TK: 'today she had even said the Eff Word. Yet Momma had let her out almost as soon as she broke' (p. 327). De Palma makes more apparent King's intended connection between ensuing womanhood and horror towards this identity through Carrie's use of TK in the closet. During 'one of the most unsettling moments in the film',[40] Carrie's anger results in the shattering of a mirror as she looks into it, reflecting the statue of Jesus Christ behind her and again making clear the ancient parallels between womanhood and the supernatural, as well as later vilification by fundamentalists because of this association. The fact that the book and novel frame the closet scene with the mother's repeated insistence that Carrie 'is a woman now' and hence in possession of a 'woman-weak, wicked soul' (p. 345) serves to draw home the message of the attainment of womanhood as an inherently sinful act. The closet space, then, exacerbates our impression of the house itself working against Carrie – in collaboration with her mother and fundamentalist discourse – as a source of harm.

Yet, at times, Carrie uses the domestic environment and the objects within it to her advantage – albeit unwittingly. As noted, Carrie's telekinetic ability is first demonstrated through connections between this power and the assumption of an adult female identity, first

[40] Mark Browning, *Stephen King on the Big Screen* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 34.

when the lights blow just after her first period and, of course, the movement of the ashtray in Mr Morton's office. His repeated mistakes with her name are representative of 'a school leadership uninterested in her'[41] and are corrected with an emphatic cry of '*That's not my name!*', at which point the ashtray 'suddenly toppled to the rug as if to take cover from the force of her scream' (p. 327). Destruction of domestic objects such as the lights, mirror and ashtray, then, are symbolic of Carrie's rejection of an identity which is forced upon her (the meek and unnoticed 'Cassie') – and one which is synonymous with sin, shame and guilt (womanhood). Other specifically domestic acts, such as Carrie's bath after the prom (in which she washes away the pig's blood) are, although reminiscent of baptism for some critics,[42] a similar demonstration of a shedding of identity in which 'Carrie seeks to wash away a sense of sin that is projected upon her'.[43] This 'sin', certainly, is the sin of womanhood.

Similarly, in *Misery*, the domestic environment and the objects within it possess a form of agency, working both *with* Annie and *against* her - safeguarding Paul's imprisonment while reinforcing the concept of home as female-prison. At several points in the novel, it appears that the house itself is conspiring against Paul and his planned escape. Again, the cinematic interpretation of the film[44] has the visual capacity to make more explicit what King attempts to communicate; when Paul gets stuck in the doorway of the kitchen in his wheelchair with the (possibly unlocked) backdoor in sight, viewers immediately understand that Paul faces many barriers to his escape that do not involve Annie but her home itself. Stuck on the threshold between safety and continued imprisonment, King (and Reiner) construct the sense of an innate understanding between women and 'their' environment of the

[41] Browning, 'King on the Big Screen', p. 33.
[42] Browning has commented on the 'overtones of baptism' during the bath scene, which features only in the film (Browning, 'King on the Big Screen', p. 34).
[43] Browning, 'King on the Big Screen', p. 34.
[44] Rob Reiner (dir.), *Misery* (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1990).

home. The fact that this barrier is the kitchen – stereotypically a female territory – is surely symbolic of a reliance upon the domestic environment and Annie for food, care and survival. In the novel, Paul suggests that Annie 'might take one casual glance in here and immediately realize in some arcane way what had happened' (pp. 503-4). 'Arcane' communicates the sense of an innate instinct which will inform Annie of his betrayal, also evident in the frequent pangs of guilt he feels at having left his room – something he believes Annie will instinctively know. Similarly, the sense of Annie's home conspiring against Paul in a collaborative relationship with his captor is tellingly portrayed by Paul's worry that he may somehow have left tracks from his wheelchair: 'he stared at it, and for a moment the idea that he must have left tracks on those clean white tiles was so persuasive that he actually *saw* them' (p. 504). Thus Paul's paranoia ('*Oh Jesus Christ, did you chip the paint, did you leave a track?*' (p. 507)) is entirely warranted as Annie's home works with her to prevent his escape. This is emphasised when Paul discovers that a domestic object has been modified to prevent calls; the telephone literally prevents his escape but remains an emblem of this lost opportunity. Furthermore, Annie's discovery that her ceramic penguin no longer faced due-south – one of several signs that Paul could leave his bedroom – epitomises the domestic environment's betrayal, and evokes one of the most horrifying scenes of the novel in which Annie hacks off Paul's foot then cauterizes the stump. Domestic objects, in a reversal of the typical talismanic function of protecting from harm, are here instrumental in the harm that comes to Paul.

Yet, just as Carrie is seen to sub-consciously utilise domestic objects for her own purposes, Paul too reverses his victimhood through resourceful use of domestic items. The typically female item of the bobby-pin, for example, is modified to create a method of unpicking the bedroom lock. Paul also uses the typewriter as a weightlifting tool, 'lifting it like some weird barbell when she was out of the room' (p. 615), clearly an attempt at

building his strength up for the day when fighting Annie for escape eventually arrives. Furthermore, when Annie returns home from town, the bobby-pin is crucial in reinstating Paul's safety as he seals himself inside his room. Many objects in the home, then, are viewed as motifs of safety and aid to Paul and yet, are also instrumental in his betrayal by the house; the discovery of the bobby-pin also demonstrates Paul's capability of escape to Annie and hence, this object is representative of both safety and danger. Yet, this dichotomy is nowhere more apparent than in Paul's consideration of the kitchen knife, which Reiner again makes more of than King. While in the novel, Paul quickly takes the knife on his third trip from his room, in the film he carefully considers whether taking the knife is worth the risk of Annie noticing it missing. Paul here stares at the knife block, while ominous music plays – evidently communicating the sense of foreboding Paul experiences when making this decision. This typically domestic item therefore signals safety and escape and yet, still possesses a hybridity by straddling the boundary between weapon and kitchen utensil. Paul's assessment of whether to take the knife is symbolic of a fear of the domestic environment and imprisonment within it, and thus, Annie and 'her' domain.

Yet, if we are to situate Annie and her tale within the Gothic tradition, her home is a symbol of her failure as woman because of its constant reminders to her that she lives alone. Annie can therefore be said to conform to what Kilgour argues is the 'likely' reaction of the female to demands placed upon her concerning her home: 'for women, especially, the home idealised as a paradise of harmonious relations is more likely to be a gothic prison. The home is a torture chamber of horrors, a feudal castle'.[45] The concept of the home as female prison is explored by King through the aforementioned use of domestic objects which betray Annie as well as Paul. The purchase of domestic items such as the typewriter, writing paper and other paraphernalia betray Paul's whereabouts to the Sheriff and work against Annie to aid Paul.

[45] Kilgour, 'The Rise of the Gothic', p. 76.

Moreover, in the final scene, Paul kills Annie with the heavy iron doorstopper. Objects which are simply lying around can instead be viewed as tools of the domestic waiting to be taken up and utilised – by prisoner and captor alike. The fact that the doorstopper is shaped like a pig (and the pig features throughout the novel and film as markers which flag up displays of the monstrous-feminine)[46] is demonstrative of Annie's death via her own monstrosity and how her extreme devotion to Paul eventually kills her.[47] Thus, King ensures that her home does not simply work with her, which would suggest a reinforcement of traditional ideas of domesticity. Instead symbolic of the redundancy of – and resultant need to shelve – the tradition of the home as woman's God-given domain, King ensures Annie's home functions as a form of prison for her too, the agency of which hinders and damages her because seeking to detain her within the very confines in which she holds Paul.

Evidently, King attaches significance to domestic locations and objects which, superficially, appear to have none. 'Place as potential escape' instead becomes 'geographical restriction or constraint',[48] and this is certainly true for King's fundamentalist women. Moreover, while it cannot be disputed that the female inhabitants in King's fiction exacerbate reader understanding of the 'home as horror' scenario, with Egan commenting that 'Mrs White's horror of sin and desire to spread God's word turn the White House into a grotesque, darkly comic environment',[49] it is also the control that the home exerts which magnifies the monstrous-feminine concept. By upholding the home as the sole sphere for women, society itself can be said to metamorphose the domestic space into a symbol of oppression and claustrophobia. In *Carrie* and *Misery*, the dark and cluttered environments are corroborative to our understanding of these locations as unpleasant, even horrifying. Littered with symbols both of the domestic and of religion, 'the Unseen Guest[s]' (C, p. 237) of God and patriarchy

[46] This will be explored in Chapter Three.
[47] This will be explored in relation to King's destructive mother-child relationships in Chapter Two.
[48] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 157.
[49] Egan, 'Sacral Parody', p. 128.

suffocate and stifle both the mothers and the children of these homes. In *The Shining*, however, the wide open spaces of the hotel work in the opposite way, to magnify our sense of the benevolent forces of the hotel working against the Torrance family to ensure their demise. The reversal of the familiar environment of the home is the source of horror and, if Sears argues that 'gothic place is both familiar and unfamiliar, affording comfort and discomfort, welcome and hostility',[50] then nowhere is this more applicable than within the Overlook Hotel.[51]

Critics have also proffered the Overlook as an overt symbol of capitalism, with the dangers of capitalist culture represented through the '*male* monster'[52] we are taught to fear. 'The patriarchal forces which permeate the Overlook Hotel and American culture in general' cannot be evaded, and Jack Torrance – 'driven by notions of the American Dream that require men to achieve material success at whatever psychic cost to themselves or others'[53] – is at the heart of the novel's concerns. No symbol of capitalism, however, can be detached from its links to consumerism – explicitly associated with the feminine in King.[54] A symbol of consumerism, the Overlook can be read as a feminine structure, capable of inciting horror because female. Indeed, Kilker has suggested that 'the explanation for Jack's monstrousness suggests that patriarchy's suppression of the feminine is itself dangerous';[55] the way Jack attempts to control the hotel (the boiler and its benevolent energy, for example) can be likened to his attempts to curb Wendy's will, encouraging the suppression of innate instincts

[50] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 161.
[51] The hotel is rendered unfamiliar because of its large scale and the manner in which its structure resembles a home but will never be one because it subverts the small-scale comfort and security of the traditional domestic setting. Much of the criticism on *The Shining* utilises Sigmund Freud's essay, 'The Uncanny' (1919) in relation to the subversion of the familiar for horrific effect. However, this is a well-trodden area of criticism of the novel and King's use of the concept of the uncanny in this text will thus not be explored in great detail here.
[52] Robert Kilker, 'All Roads Lead to the Abject: The Monstrous Feminine and Gender Boundaries in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*', *Literature Film Quarterly*, 34 (2006), p. 54.
[53] Kilker, 'All Roads Lead to the Abject', p. 55.
[54] This is particularly true of *Misery*, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.
[55] Kilker, 'All Roads Lead to the Abject', p. 55.

she has been taught to exhibit in relation to Danny.[56] Yet, the hotel's displays of the supernatural are attempts at rebuffing the patriarchal ideology projected onto her; like Carrie, the Overlook utilises the long-held association between women and the supernatural for her own purposes, shedding an unwanted and damaging identity through force.

Only males truly experience the forces of the hotel, for example. Wendy does not feel the influence of the Overlook at all and, if we turn to Freudian analysis,[57] it is certainly significant that the Overlook exerts little control over Wendy. Russell suggests that because 'Wendy has no special powers […] she doesn't interest the hotel and seldom experiences its force',[58] but this is too prosaic. Only terrorised through the experiences of her husband and son, the hotel as female entity is disinterested in controlling Wendy. Here, the perceived 'other' is the males in its midst, and the hotel's agency is seen to concentrate its efforts on terrorising Jack and Danny by using their innate 'powers' (Danny's 'shine' and Jack's propensity for violence) against them. Furthermore, while Wendy and Danny both fear the Overlook, Danny's terror is attached to the hotel itself while Wendy's is attached to its isolation and to Jack. The only supernatural incident that Wendy experiences is within a feminine domain (and therefore rendered unthreatening for her). The elevator, according to Watson, is a 'bitch to keep runnin' (p. 22) and, while indicative of Watson's frequent gendering of the hotel,[59] the elevator's movement between floors of her own accord is seemingly in response to Watson; she runs just fine – and yet with an ulterior motive, communicating to Wendy the need to leave via the fear instilled by this proof of a supernatural presence.

[56] This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.
[57] As noted in the Introduction, Freudian analysis suggests that males experience more ambivalence towards the figure of the feminine than women do, largely as a result of her perceived castration.
[58] Russell, 'King: A Critical Companion', p. 55.
[59] This will be explored in relation to the 'body' of the Overlook as site of horror in Chapter Three.

Of course, it can be argued that driving Jack to violence is how the Overlook terrorises Wendy, curbing the feminine in order that patriarchy can still dominate; certainly, the fact that the Overlook is a feminine structure is of little help to Wendy when Jack turns murderous. Nevertheless, while the forces of the Overlook are a catalyst for Jack's breakdown and consequent violence, Wendy is taught to attempt to leave Jack by the hotel before any real harm comes to herself and her son. King has stated that, unlike Stanley Kubrick, he '*always* thought there were malevolent ghosts in The Overlook, driving Jack towards the precipice'.[60] If never influenced by the Overlook and its forces, Jack would never have been driven to display what is arguably a combination of the supernatural, isolation-induced psychosis *and* his true nature. This propensity for violence would still be awaiting release later – possible causing irrevocable damage to Wendy and Danny. The agency of the Overlook thus teaches Wendy the underlying dangers of her marital situation.

The Overlook as teacher is seen elsewhere in the novel, asserting Wendy's strength and that of the feminine – a strength which is not an image of horror, but instead, of necessity. Although Grady's assistance ensures Jack can escape from the fridge, the kitchen is still a site of female will. Wendy's imprisonment of Jack in the fridge is the first occasion of her asserting any control over him in order to ensure the safety of herself and her son. Additionally, as Jack is learning how to control the 'creep[ing]' (p. 21) tendency of the boiler, for example, he subconsciously summons the memory of his son coming to harm, with Russell concurring that 'he recalls discovering that his three-year-old son had poured beer on his manuscript. Jack's reaction shocks us: he twists and breaks Danny's arm'.[61] This memory is summoned as he learns to assert control over 'the old whore' (p. 20), and yet, is reminded of a time when another attempt went badly wrong. The hotel often makes Jack summon incidents when he lost control but was in fact attempting to assert it, with varying degrees of

[60] King, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[61] Russell, 'King: A Critical Companion', p. 47.

outcome: the George Hatfield incident, Danny's arm and the phone call to Ullman in which Jack even asks himself '*why are you baiting him? Do you want to be fired*?' (p. 199). Consequently, these reminders – although spurring Jack on in many ways – can also be viewed as a warning not to try to tame the forces of the Overlook. Jack's memory of breaking Danny's arm is also one which he sub-consciously infuses with Wendy's growing hatred for him and becomes a pivotal point in their marriage breakdown: 'he was standing there and the eyes met the eyes of his wife and he saw that Wendy hated him' (p. 19). Hence, when Russell and others state that Wendy is often only a figure of victimhood, a 'pathetic'[62] symbol of patriarchy's oppression of women, it can be argued that her true feelings – and resistance to Jack in the protection of her son – are unwittingly evoked in Jack's consciousness through his exposure to the 'female' elements of the hotel. The boiler and the basement thus become the ultimate bad place for Jack because representative of an awareness that Wendy does not love him unquestioningly and will, in fact, harm him if necessary. Only through the support of the hotel, however, does this come into fruition – again exposing the sense of agency within King's domestic settings as intrinsic components of his true stance on women.

King's situation of the monstrous-feminine within the confines of the home, then, can be said to affirm patriarchal (but religiously sanctioned) tradition by still detaining women within the private domestic sphere. However, King's women are portrayed as monstrous *through* the domestic scene, exacerbating our innate conception of the feminine as source of harm as the means with which to subvert tradition and expose the shockingly 'conservative ideology of gender'[63] inherent in fundamentalism and society as the true source of horror. Working in a collaborative relationship, the home and woman undertake a reclamation of power, and what at first feels like another affirmation of patriarchy is in fact the method with

[62] Mary Pharr, 'Partners in the *Danse*: Women in Stephen King's Fiction' in *The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horroscape*, ed. Tony Magistrale (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 26.
[63] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 4.

which King acknowledges, then subverts, such a tradition. Such domestic confines are exposed as equally harmful to our female protagonists, a primal awareness of which sees Carrie and Wendy assert their own forms of independence against the control asserted over them. Exposing the outdated ammunition used against the feminine by religion, King conjures up traditional and biblical ideas of women as the root cause of, and fuel for, a war which still wages on between the sexes. With the home subverting its true purpose as a result, King subsequently turns mother's caring role on its head. Via the very 'rules' she follows in order to excel in what has been ordained by God as her only purpose, mother – like home – becomes smotheringly monstrous and grotesque. Such an analysis corroborates with conclusions drawn in this chapter; King is not necessarily reinforcing patriarchal prejudices by returning frequently to the mother as horror archetype, but is instead exposing its consequences when adhered to unquestioningly. The next chapter will thus analyse how and why religious and patriarchal constructions of motherhood are the true sources of destruction from – and for – the feminine.

Chapter Two

'I'm your number one fan': Mother as Horror

'What a grave and sacred responsibility this is. To provide food, clothing, and shelter, may be the easiest part for many couples. To be a true *mother* goes far beyond supplying these temporal needs. The love, nurturing, the careful guiding, the moral example, the moral teaching, the training, is the most important of all'.[64]

Edward Brandt's statement concerning the underlying role of motherhood and its resultant 'responsibility' can be said to succinctly embody both traditional attitudes towards women and fundamentalist ideals which decry motherhood to be the ultimate fulfilment. Given that fundamentalist literature is vehement in its insistence that 'the family is the natural home of religion, and […] the woman in the family is its pivotal personality and principal guardian'[65] it is perhaps unsurprising that the home as hub of religious teachings (and mother's unwavering position within the domestic) unites to form a comprehension of mother as ultimate care-giver. Note that the provision of temporal needs applies to both male and female – father *and* mother; yet, moral and spiritual guidance appears the sole domain of the feminine. Given Brandt's stance, it is certainly crucial that the fundamentalist mothers in King's fiction are anything other than the aforementioned ideal despite their ardent devotion to their faith.

Inextricably bound up with the previous chapter's analyses of the monstrous domestic, this chapter again sees King visit the horrific and the terrifying upon our conception of safety and comfort. Excess is a determining characteristic; for the mothers in King's fiction, excess defines them – both in relation to their fundamentalist beliefs and consequently, the 'love' they shower upon their child, combining to form a potent realisation in the reader's mind that the two strands of devotion are inseparable. Again directly echoing

[64] Edward M. Brandt, "Mother" in *The Way of Truth*, 47 (1989) cited in Randall Balmer, 'American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity' in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 48.
[65] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 4.

Kristevan summations of the abject, King's mothers often 'refuse to relinquish a hold on their child', with Barbara Creed proffering films such as *Carrie* as 'representative of the archaic maternal figure'.[66] Mother's tight hold 'prevents [the child] from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic'[67] and represents a manifest threat embodied in patriarchal and fundamentalist notions of the feminine. The child must break away from mother in order to become 'a separate subject', and yet, she is 'something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, [she] beckons to us and ends up engulfing us'.[68] It is mother's 'trans-linguistic impact'[69] throughout life that ensures survival, but such an impact creates an irrevocable connection that can never be transcended and is marked by the 'most irreducible mark of birth: the *navel*'.[70] 'The scar left where the cord was cut'[71] is an ever-present reminder of the symbolic order in which mother was jettisoned and is thus a signifier both of mother's love and the abject horror we must conceive toward the feminine. Robert Kilker therefore argues that the horror constructed around motherhood echoes the fear of failing to 'cut the apron strings': 'not merely a sign of immaturity, it is a sign of certain doom'.[72]

Cultural ambivalence towards the mother consequently replicates this push/pull factor, with the contradictions attached to women approached in King via a combination of childhood fear and overbearing 'smother-love'. Combined with ardent devotion to fundamentalism, King is clearly commenting on the damaging effects of the feminine ideal construct. In *Carrie*, contradictory ideas about motherhood are explored through Margaret's

[66] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.
[67] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 12.
[68] Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror', p, 4.
[69] Estelle Barrett, *Kristeva Reframed* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p. 74.
[70] Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror', p. 39.
[71] Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror', p. 39.
[72] Kilker, 'All Roads Lead to the Abject', p. 58.

behaviour. Militant in her views, she has seemingly been taught of her 'pivotal personality'[73] as head of the home (as mother and as breadwinner after her husband's death) and she should theoretically excel at caring for Carrie. We know, however, that this is far from the case. Under the veil of strict religious views, Margaret in fact shuns her role as mother and – though the most ardent of the fundamentalists selected – betrays herself as the most confused by her faith. We know that Margaret very nearly killed herself when she learnt of her pregnancy with Carrie, and had miscarried prior to this but experienced no grief for 'that was God's judgement [and] the sin had been expiated' (p. 420). Both pregnancies were viewed as atypical in Margaret's eyes of the 'weak and backsliding' (p. 421) nature of woman. A contamination of her body which mimicked her 'black and rotten' soul (p. 421), Margaret viewed pregnancy not as the fulfilment of the role ordained by God, but rather, as a symbol of the 'sin' of intercourse. Because the belief in this sin takes precedence over the notion of pregnancy as deliverance of God's ideal, Margaret's faith is what fuels her desire to kill Carrie at birth: taught to be mother above all else and yet taught that sex is sin, Margaret's view embodies the many contradictions inherent in archaic notions of woman. One way or another, woman must make a choice between these teachings – sinful because sexual, or sinful because not a mother. Inhabiting both is why Margaret cannot cope and – although she 'backslid again' (p. 421) by remaining a mother – her lack of acceptance towards this status is what fuels her monstrousness, in turn exposing the contradictions of her faith as the true source of horror.

Indeed, very little transferral of love is evident in Margaret's relationship with her child, symbolic of her confusion at the hands of her faith. In direct juxtaposition to tender moments of *The Dead Zone*, in which Johnny continues to have a loving relationship with his mother despite her loss of sanity through devotion (he sees 'more mother than madness' (p.

[73] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 4.

124) in her smile at a time when she comforts him, for example), we see none of these in *Carrie*. Amplifying what is already a strong reader reaction to Margaret, the novel ensures we comprehend just how 'abnormal' she is in her motherly role. The account from Carrie's neighbour details the 'rain of stones' in which she believes Carrie's 'mother's sickness hadn't touched her very deeply, not then' (p. 334). However, there is a stark contrast between how Estelle and her mother interact and how Carrie is treated by Margaret. The shock of seeing Carrie near a bikini-clad teenager ushers in an obvious display of monstrosity from Margaret, who made the 'ugliest sound I've ever heard in my life […] Her face was all scrunched up, and it was a gargoyle's face' (p. 334). In a damning testimony, Estelle is keen to highlight Carrie's obvious terror and how Margaret has subverted her caring role:

> I thought Carrie was going to faint – or die on the spot […] she looked back at me and there was a look . . . oh, dreadful. I can't say it. Wanting and hating and fearing . . . and *misery*. As if life itself had fallen on her like stones, all at the age of three (p. 334).[74]

Margaret's monstrosity is pitched against Estelle's mother's behaviour: 'my mother brewed us scotch tea […] the way she used to when I was tomboying around and someone would push me in the nettle patch or I'd fall off my bicycle' (p. 335). Recalling occasions that betray her young age, Estelle is unwittingly juxtaposing the comfort she received from her own mother with the lack Carrie feels from Margaret. The tenderness displayed in the interactions of this mother-daughter relationship drive home Margaret's obvious deficit in her role. 'Clutching each other like school children' (p. 335), Estelle and her mother epitomise a caring mother-child relationship. Thus this one passage alone communicates all there is to know about Carrie's loving relationship with her mother – it is non-existent, and yet, is so *because* of Margaret's faith.

The mother-child relationship in *Carrie* is perhaps the most telling in relation to

[74] Of course, this latter sentence is significant, given that the 'rain of stones' on the White home (depicted as Carrie's first display of telekinetic ability) occurs shortly afterwards.

King's preoccupation. Margaret's 'abnormal' reaction to her child is condemned by readers via the tone of King's narrative; repeatedly emphasising Carrie's turmoil, the omniscient narrator is keen to point out that we should be repulsed by Margaret's lack of maternal instinct and monstrous treatment of Carrie. This is indicative, however, of King's turning of the spotlight onto expectations placed upon women in relation to how they 'should' feel as mothers – and onto their origins. Margaret only acts this way because strictly adhering to other aspects of the fundamentalist agenda which teach of the 'sin' inherent in becoming mother. What we are in reality condemning, then, is the discourse which dictates such contradictions, and this comes to the fore in how we view Carrie herself. King has himself stated that he 'never got to like Carrie',[75] and here we stumble upon a marked difference between how King presents male 'victims' of the mother-child relationship which is in fact representative of the conservative ideology of gender condemned throughout his works. We are taught, always, to sympathise with the likes of Johnny Smith, Danny Torrance and Paul Sheldon[76] and yet, Carrie – the only female child of our selected novels – is disliked by author and reader alike. Many aspects of Carrie as central protagonist corroborate with our well-established impression of the female form as monstrous and grotesque; elements which have – superficially at least – allowed critics such as Yarbro to launch into attacks on King. Furthermore, the irony of King's writing a novel 'about women and for the purpose of breaking stereotypes'[77] which has in reality done so much to fuel and perpetuate them is not lost on critics, with Douglas Keesey labelling Carrie 'patriarchal society's worst nightmare concerning women and their bodies'.[78] Again, critics are here missing the point. What repels us about both Carrie and her mother are the 'nightmar[ish]' manner with which they

[75] Stephen King, *On Writing* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2000), p. 54.
[76] Plus many other peripheral 'sons' whose mothers are key examples of the monstrous-feminine.
[77] Pharr, 'Partners in the *Danse*', p. 21.
[78] Douglas Keesey, 'Telekinesis and Menstruation in Stephen King's *Carrie*' (Paper presented to the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., March 1990) cited in Mary Pharr, 'Partners in the *Danse*: Women in Stephen King's Fiction' in *The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horrorscape*, ed. Tony Magistrale (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 21.

underscore each and every patriarchal expectation placed upon women – turning grotesque the very bodies and personalities circumscribed by Christian ideology as 'the highest form of God's creation'[79] into monstrous products of this ideology's making. By utilising the subversion of the very patriarchal demands which Keesey suggests labels Carrie a 'nightmare', King draws attention not simply to how we expect Carrie and her mother to behave as women, but *why* they cannot conform.

Though Margaret has been shown to resent her role as mother, for example, she also takes on the distant fatherly role advocated by the Church. Historically, the men who were seen to have distanced themselves from the domestic too succeeded in distancing themselves from their children and allowing mother to take on the primary familial role. Margaret takes over the masculine role once her husband dies – assuming a paternal, rather than strong *maternal*, identity that contributes hugely to our impression of Carrie as grotesque. Clare Hanson concurs: 'uncertain of her own identity, [Margaret] finds relief in a "false" identification with the masculine role, and this has the effect […] of intensifying Carrie's feelings of disgust and shame towards the feminine and the maternal'.[80] We thus see Carrie mimic our own innate disgust as 'voyeurs'[81] of the shower scene. Not only are we 'forced (?) to witness an extreme/horror inspired by the menstrual blood of others'[82], we are forced via King's narration to assume the patriarchal disgust towards the feminine so well embodied in Keesey's statement. Carrie, as a product of *paternal* rather than maternal care, 'is brought up to fear and distrust'[83] the 'Curse of Blood' (p. 346) alongside other aspects of her femininity such as sexual desire. Emblematic of the distaste inherent in the male gaze towards overt

[79] Bailey Smith, interviewed on *Larry King Live*, March 21, 1989, cited in Randall Balmer, 'American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity' in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 42.
[80] Hanson, 'King: Powers of Horror', p. 49.
[81] Hanson, 'King: Powers of Horror', p. 47.
[82] Hanson, 'King: Powers of Horror', p. 47.
[83] Hanson, 'King: Powers of Horror', p. 49.

presentations of the 'grotesque' feminine, Carrie and her mother are depicted as monstrous using imagery which cites a male spectator: 'if someone had been there to watch, he would have been struck by the resemblance between them' (p. 420). Clearly referencing a male voyeur of the scene, this masculine gaze is demonstrative of how patriarchy defines the feminine as horrific and not woman (or Carrie) herself. Moreover, Margaret's denouncement of the feminine (via her shunning of motherhood and assumption of a masculine power she has – according to fundamentalist and patriarchal thought – no right to take) must be rectified; she must be rendered monstrous in order that such 'threat' to social order is contained. It is thus the 'father' (in both the literal, biblical and patriarchal sense) who damages – when we abhor Margaret's behaviour, we are in reality abhorring the multi-faceted demands placed upon the feminine.

Our other mothers, however, are defined not by the monstrous cruelty they display towards their children, but how their care and concern can itself become monstrous. Jane Ussher alludes to a necessary personality split within the biology of the female: 'it has been suggested that a sharp conflict occurs between a woman's cultural femininity, which requires dependent and inactive behaviour, and her biological femininity, which demands aggression, activity and competence'.[84] Indeed, it is this cultural femininity which is at odds with the innate requirement for mothers to protect their offspring, evinced in *The Dead Zone*'s Vera and her displays of ruthlessness for Johnny: 'for a moment she looked calm, and then she clawed for the phone like a tigress' (p. 59). Moreover, the previous chapter has made allusions to the distinction between Wendy's apparently meek and pathetic personality and the fierceness with which she protects Danny. The metamorphosis of this vehemence into a

[84] Jane Ussher, *The Psychology of the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 81.

source of harm interests King. Defined by Bernadette Lynn Bosky as 'smother-love',[85] all of the other selected King novels feature mothers whose love can be typified by this term and who, ironically, subvert their God-given pursuit by harming their children and their smooth transition into or through adulthood.[86] Vera can undoubtedly be defined as a mother whose love subverts its purpose by harming – rather than helping – her child. Her importance to the novel's agenda cannot be underestimated; the significance of familial relationships to the plot is – like many other King novels – crucial in reinforcing our understanding of parent-child bonds as cyclic perpetuations of abuse, and yet, the poignancy lies in Michael Stanton's claim that the 'keystone of many of these relationships is fear or hatred'.[87] Such fear and hatred subverts our expectations of mother's role; Vera's strict adherence to the ideology which seeks to preserve the family unit is, ironically, what causes her own family unit to break down. Her devout Baptist inclinations take on a renewed fervour after Johnny's accident that sees her increasingly alienate herself from her family, and when Johnny wakes he finds it 'impossible to reconcile the pamphlets with the religious yet earthy woman he had known before his coma' (p. 146). His phrasing is interesting here; an 'earthy' woman is surely closer to God's ideal than any other, and yet, what made her 'ideal' in God's eyes has been stripped away *because* of adherence to His word. Vera's renewed religious study is depicted as the reason behind their fraught familial relations and, if 'God measures a woman's success by her relationship with her husband and children',[88] Vera is far from the ideal as a direct result of her faith. Searching for meaning behind Johnny's accident, Vera 'read […] to tatters' new

[85] Bernadette Lynn Bosky, 'Playing the Heavy: Weight, Appetite and Embodiment in Three Novels by Stephen King' in Tony Magistrale (ed.), *The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horrorscape* (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 147.
[86] As her essay title suggests, Bosky focuses upon the centrality of weight and appetite in King's fiction as a core component of his delivery of horror, but also, its importance in defining the monstrous-feminine within selected novels. An interpretation of this will be offered in Chapter Three's consideration of the female body as site of horror for King.
[87] Michael N. Stanton, 'Some Ways of Reading *The Dead Zone*' in *The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horrorscape*, ed. Tony Magistrale (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 65.
[88] Barbara A Peil, 'A Seasoned Approach', *Kindred Spirit*, 11 (1987) cited in Randall Balmer, 'American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity' in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 48.

magazines and publications: 'she found a great many things in them that seemed to bear upon Johnny's accident, and she read these nuggets to her tired husband at supper in a high, piercing voice that trembled with exaltation' (p. 80). Herb consequently 'found himself telling her […] on occasion to shut up that drivel and let him alone' (p. 80). Herb here becomes increasingly impatient with Vera, signalling a decline in the relationship that readers have been set up to assume was functioning perfectly well prior to this renewed devotion. Alienating herself from her husband, Vera is an atypical example of the fundamentalist women we find in King; her 'continued withdrawal into her own world' (p. 83) typifies what King attempts to communicate throughout his works – 'that evangelism alienates, spreading confusion and dissension'.[89]

Johnny's obvious love for his mother is coupled with fear towards her predilection for launching into sermons: 'he was smiling at her, but holding the smile was an effort' (p. 124). Vera's devotion is not simply exhausting for Johnny, but literally harmful to his health: 'he had read his way dutifully through the tracts his mother had left him. They depressed him and left him frightened all over again for his sanity' (p. 145). King clearly intends that we condemn Vera's behaviour – implicit in the phrasing he chooses of the 'tired' husband, and the son who 'felt sick to his stomach and exhausted and suddenly furious at his mother' (p. 163). We, too, are furious that Vera is hindering Johnny's recovery in such an obvious way, yet her faith blinds her to such damage. Vera's incessant pursuit of God's 'plan for Johnny' (p. 120) is foreseen by Herb to be a problem, and he implores her to 'keep [her] trap shut about God and miracles and Great Plans until Johnny's up on his feet' (p. 121). Thus epitomising the concept of 'smother love', Vera refuses to comprehend the idea that she is doing more harm than good, stifling Johnny's attempt at conventional recovery by insisting upon her own form of rehabilitation: 'this is *foolishness*! […] There's no need […] to let

[89] Egan, 'Sacral parody', p. 127.

those doctors go on torturing him. It's wrong, it's not helping' (pp. 162-3). King's technique of italicising crucial phrases here works to demonstrate the irony of Vera's words – oblivious to her own foolishness, unhelpfulness and wrongdoing, she insists that he turn to God above all else.

Vera's trust in God's plan also leads her to her death when she refuses to take the tablets prescribed for her hypertension, rationalised in the following comment: 'if God needed her treading the earth, then he would see she continued to tread it. If God wanted to call her home, he would do that even if she took a barrel of pills a day' (p. 165). Vera's devotion to God, then, literally kills her – and what is initially viewed as intense faith comes to symbolise danger. Additionally, the stroke as cause of death is directly attributed to seeing Johnny on television, an importance not lost on him: 'she was watching *me* when it happened. Don't you get that?' (p. 188). Though her comical (because dramatic) death is certainly contributory to King's parody, when united with Johnny's death[90] King certainly drives the message home of the destruction caused by mother-child relationships in which all perspective is lost; such conformity to God's ideal produces damaged mothers and children who are literally destroyed by it.

Similarly, a destructive mother-child relationship which is fuelled by devotion is the defining characteristic of *Misery*, in which Annie is literally destroyed by her devotion to her 'son' and her 'religion'. One of the core reasons behind Annie's horrific depiction is her assumption of a motherly role that she has no right to take, made manifest in the line that 'she smiled at him with that terrible bogus maternity' (p. 509). King is fond of using the term 'terrible' to depict his women,[91] and yet 'bogus maternity' ushers in the impression of a fraudulent pretence – one that appears to signal love and care but in fact masks danger and

[90] The responsibility for Johnny's death arguably lies at his mother's feet for insisting Johnny put his ability to good use; he consequently dies by attempting to prevent Greg Stillson's ascent to power.
[91] This idea will be returned to in Chapter Three.

destruction. The tone of the narrative ensures we sympathise with Paul, and this is replicated in King as recently as 2011. *11.22.63*'s playful look at 'smother love' in fact subtly reiterates King's agenda. The comic value of 'that wagging finger'[92] and other 'timeless Mom-gestures' emphasised in Marguerite Oswald's 'dissatisfied and pugnacious' (p. 277) demeanour mask what is essentially still a dangerous form of devotion that drives her child away: '*Lee had to go all the way to Russia to get away from that wagging finger*' (p. 277). This 'pernicious brand of smother-love' (p. 317) is depicted by King as a possible driving force behind Lee Harvey Oswald's political extremism.[93] Destructive for Lee and others, King again exposes how the children of such relationships may themselves be driven to violent acts as a result of such an upbringing.

The desire for – and fear of – this love therefore becomes the driving force behind King's key images of horror. Annie's assertion of 'I'm your number one fan' (p. 460), both melodramatic and implausible, is met with disdain by Paul as the epitome of the 'threatening demands of the adult woman'.[94] 'That spirit of . . . of fan-love' (p. 458) is precisely what Paul shrinks away from in retiring Misery Chastain from the literary world, and yet, Annie is very obviously associated by Paul with his inability to pull back from his popular fiction output (evident in the horror and comfort he feels at returning to and rewriting *Misery's Child*, for example). Cast as the mother we struggle to jettison, the push/pull trajectory so intrinsic to our relationship with the maternal is embodied in Annie, whose 'strange maternal grin' (p. 454) is a reminder of such internal confusion. Likewise, Paul knows his dangerous situation has been dictated purely by his status, ensuring we connect Annie (and the maternal) with harmful 'fan-love': 'she had kept *him* because he was Paul Sheldon' (p. 465). When Paul experiences pain – always associated with Annie because of the frequent surrender and

[92] Stephen King, *11.22.63* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 277. All further references will be given in the body of the text.
[93] Of course, such extremism is later the apparent motivation behind John F. Kennedy's assassination.
[94] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 113.

withdrawal of his Novril – he summons memories of his biological mother, and the displays of comfort and cruelty that Annie meanders between: 'an awful memory bloomed there in the dark: his mother […] telling him as they rode the trolley back to Lynn that he was a bawl-baby and sissy' (p. 465). Furthermore, parallels between Annie's fan-love as horror and his mother's awe at his writing ability are often bound together: '*Annie Wilkes*. ('*He can read at just three! Can you imagine!'*) *That spirit of . . . fan-love . . .* ('*He's always writing things down, making things up.*') (p. 466). The bracketed text is immediately separated from, but blurred with, Annie's lines – forming an explicit connection between the boundaries he attempts to set up against his biological mother's smothering awe-love and that of Annie's. Just as Lee Oswald had to leave for Russia to evade his mother, Annie becomes 'utterly monstrous, something [Paul] *must* escape' (p. 464).

It cannot be coincidental that Paul's accident is portrayed as a return to womb-like oblivion: 'there was only the haze' (p. 447) communicates the incomprehension he struggles to shed. While regaining consciousness and attempting to orient himself, Paul recalls his father and mother on the beach with him, his father explaining the tidal process: 'it was the tide, his father tried to explain' (p. 448). A sign imploring visitors to 'KEEP YOUR BEACH CLEAN' (p. 448) is noted by Paul and yet, images of decay frequently surface: 'the rotted piling […] its blackish, slime-smoothed sides surrounded by scuds of foam […] the memory circled […] maddening, like a sluggish fly' (p. 448). Such 'rotted pilings' are arguably symbolic of abjection at work. Coinciding with the physical intrusion by 'mother' Annie, Paul is attempting to maintain boundaries between the clean and unclean and hence, the sign asking that you keep 'YOUR' beach clean becomes an implicit reminder of a process we must all undergo in order to survive. Paul's boundaries are destroyed by Annie as she resuscitates him, an act he likens to rape: 'she had forced into him the way a man might force a part of himself into an unwilling woman' (p. 448). Such an adult image cannot, however, be

reconciled with the primordial comprehension of infection which Paul attributes to Annie; her 'stinking breath' (p. 449) coincides with the image of 'rotted pilings' and he begs '*don't infect me anymore*' (p. 449). Literally straddling the boundary between life and death, Paul is forced to relive this jettisoning of the dangerous mother: 'he did not *let* her breath out but *pushed* it and whooped in a gigantic breath of his own. Shoved it out' (p. 449). In order to comprehend his own situation, Paul must immediately conceive Annie/mother as a figure of danger, as his father had before him (evident in his father's presence and attempt to impart knowledge in the memory). Utilising abjection, King makes links between the drive Annie has to save Paul ('Breathe, goddammit! *Breathe*, Paul!' (p. 448)) and Paul's disgust and insistence that this should not occur – he is not grateful for her help or her smother-love and would, in fact, rather relinquish it: when Annie mutters 'Whew! That was a close one!' Paul internally responds '*Not close enough*' (p. 449).

Annie's status as 'number-one fan' is also indicative of our other mother-child relationships. Such 'fans' are mothers in awe of what is perceived to be their child's God-given ability and it is interesting to note how they deal with and confront this. Mirroring Annie's view of Paul's writing talent as a gift from God, Vera views Johnny's ability as 'God-given' and consequently, divine. Closer to the Lord because 'touched' by Him in their eyes, Annie and Vera's unwitting attempts to stifle their children can be directly attributed to an overwhelming necessity to get closer to God. However, it is interesting that our other mothers – Margaret and Wendy – view their child's ability as horrifying, verging on evil. As we know, Margaret insists that 'the devil has come home' (p. 421) in Carrie – and her TK (or witch-like tendency) is therefore viewed as caused by the sin of womanhood. Wendy, though largely incomparable to Margaret in her motherly role, also views Danny's 'shine' with fear and distrust: 'she was in awe of her child – awe in the strict meaning of that word: a kind of undefined superstitious dread' (p. 56). Attributed by Wendy to his being born with a caul

over his face, Danny's ability is certainly supernatural in Wendy's eyes: 'she did not hold with superstition but she had kept the caul nevertheless' (p. 57). The fact that Margaret and Wendy are our least oppressive mothers signals a direct link between how they categorise their child's ability as a gift or curse and the extent of their 'smother-love'. The extent and manner of their devotion to God dictates their devotion to their child and such divine abilities – and King is again assigning our dislike of the mothers to a dislike for the ideologies they subscribe to.

Conclusively, King can be said to utilise the monstrous-feminine to create an image of horror irrevocably attached to fundamentalist ideology via mother's role, and 'smother-love' is the resultant product of lives that must revolve around the home and family. Fanatical about their religion, Vera and Margaret's devotion is exposed as culpable for their confusion as mothers. Similarly, though not strictly fundamentalist, Annie and Wendy's devotion to their children serves to link them to fundamentalist thought, ensuring our ambivalence toward them is traceable to an exterior locale. Taught for centuries that motherhood is their only role but taught, too, that sex is specifically a sin of the flesh (and hence, the feminine) which must be contained at all costs, King's mothers develop an ambivalent relationship with themselves and their bodies which mirrors these contradictions. As a core component of King's delivery of horror, the monstrous female body rests upon its reproductive ability – the development and removal of which dictates both their relationships with themselves and how the masculine gaze seeks to define women within these biological parameters. Control becomes a deciding factor in the extent of the grotesque body, whereupon a loss of control is perceived as a surrender to a more primitive, and thus, more dangerous femininity that must be avoided at all costs. Chapter Three will explore religious and patriarchal boundaries of control as the scale against which the monstrous female body is measured against.

Chapter Three

The Abject Feminine: The Female Body as Horror

'The female breast is the natural soil of Christianity'.[95]

'The woman's body, with its potential for gestating forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil; a hoard of ambivalences, most of which have worked to disqualify women from the collective act of defining culture'.[96]

Given that fundamentalist ideology is heavily reliant upon traditional interpretations of the Bible, it is unsurprising to note Evangelic Benjamin Rush's summation of the female breast as the natural 'soil' of Christianity; indicative of its nourishing and life-giving capabilities, Rush's imagery is synonymous with religious conceptions of the female body as beacon of fecundity and site of nourishment. Similarly, Adrienne Rich's comment is reminiscent of Rush's view in that it references the female body's 'potential' – invested with power because crucial for the perpetuation of the human race, and therefore, a sacred site to be protected at all costs. However, Rich also highlights a 'hoard of ambivalences'; in the same breath as being venerated in religious ideology, woman's body is representative of the evils of humankind. The portrayal of the female form in King's fiction embodies the aforementioned contradiction; 'King's women' are taught to view their bodies as ambivalent sites both of life-giving capability and powerful (because sexual) entities which must be contained. Indeed, the concept of control is crucial to King's representation of the monstrous-feminine, in which a loss of such points to a defilement of the pure form given by God and hence, must be avoided at all costs.

Such loss of control is often only perceived, however, and the women of this study have already been highlighted as confused by such pressures. Margaret and Vera's

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[95] Interview with Benjamin Rush in *Women and Religion in America*, 3 Vols, eds., Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981-1986, vol 2., p. 402) cited in Randall Balmer, 'American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity' in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 50.

[96] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 102 in Jane M Ussher, *The Psychology of the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 77-8.

psychological wellbeing does deteriorate as a result of their faith and hence, such psychosis is traceable to these exterior ideologies which must be held culpable. Their 'loss of control' thus appears literal. Nevertheless, when we interrogate how these women view their bodies, the forms of control they have been taught to exert over themselves are so multi-faceted that, somewhere, control must be compromised – and a perceived loss of agency over the body is presented as the ultimate in monstrosity. Moreover, the womb 'as the matrix of all problems'[97] is continually referenced as being the root cause and fuel for images of the monstrous-feminine, ensuring that the wealth of diatribes attached to the female form almost always revert back to her reproductive ability. Building upon his extensive engagement with abjection, King consequently highlights the varying stages of monstrosity which have become attached to female life-stages and how – despite not being complicit in their creation – women are expected to conform or face vilification.

Mother has in the previous chapter been exposed as a motif of abjection – and yet, well before motherhood, our primordial instincts combine with social objectification (and thus affirmation of the female as 'other') to decry the feminine to be the ultimate in abject. From puberty onward, woman is second only to the corpse on this scale of the abject. Yet, it must be noted that King chooses to combine fundamentalism with the monstrous female body – themes which perhaps seem rather disparate, but are in fact built upon similar arenas of control that rely upon the concept of abjection. Resting upon extensive suppression and denial of innate instincts, abjection mirrors the same processes that fundamentalists adhere to in their quest to transcend 'various human limitations, including death'.[98] The body and all its horrors become implicit reminders of mortality, since our daily lives are – rather bleakly – steps on the road to death; inevitably, 'the physical body decays and finally dies'.[99] Impurity

[97] Ussher, 'Psychology', p. 3.
[98] McCarthy Brown, 'Fundamentalism and the Control of Women', p. 188.
[99] McCarthy Brown, 'Fundamentalism and the Control of Women', p. 188.

via corruption or pollution becomes symbolic of nearing death – translating to a fear of the flesh in general. Females bear the brunt of such control because they 'generally carry the greater burden of human fleshliness'.[100] The repression of bodily needs and functions – the realities of mortality, essentially – therefore forges a strong link between women, the body and control. Such considerations are of course fundamental to how we view the women in King's fiction, and corroborate with King's moral agenda of situating the feminine ideals intrinsic to fundamentalist and patriarchal ideology as the real 'problem' with – or indeed, *for* – women.

King combines abjection with his protagonists' perceived loss of control at different life stages. The most notable of these combinations is of course *Carrie*, in which we are forced – as noted – to witness a display of menstruation that should remain hidden; Hanson argues that 'the surface of life is peeled back in such a scene to show the abject which lies "behind" it, that which is "secret" (blood should remain *within*)'.[101] But what exactly is it that teaches us that menstrual blood should remain concealed? Indeed, only woman can produce the abject 'menstrual' substance that, alongside the 'excremental', forms the two distinct categories of substance abjection.[102] Kristeva suggests that mother's trans-linguistic influence communicates this to us, enabling us to render substances such as rotten food, excrement, pus, and blood harmful to the body and life – and that which must be abjected: 'such waste drops so that I might continue to live until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver'.[103] Produced from within, the female menstrual capability subconsciously suggests an interior site of corruption for males. Such pollution is thus viewed as a defilement of the pure body given to us by God, corresponding with various

[100] McCarthy Brown, 'Fundamentalism and the Control of Women', p. 176.
[101] Hanson, 'King: Powers of Horror', p. 48.
[102] Excremental substance, which 'threatens identity from the outside' as opposed to the inside (the menstrual) is also associated with the mother 'because of [her] role in sphincteral training' (Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 12).
[103] Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror', p. 3.

'categories of abomination'[104] which signal an outright corruption of purity.[105] Contemporary horror culture takes up many of these 'abominations' as the means with which to usher in a direct confrontation with the disgust/desire trajectory of abjection:

> When we say such-and-such a horror film 'made me sick' or 'scared the shit out of me' we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a 'work of abjection' or 'abjection at work' – almost in a literal sense. Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat).[106]

It is therefore religious condemnation towards the 'abomination' that is femininity – combined with abjection – which ushers in revulsion towards this overt displays of the monstrous-feminine. Carrie's public menstruation represents a loss of control over her body, and even Miss Dejardin, who knows this is her first period, is disgusted and irritated by Carrie's confrontation with an element of womanhood that all women are complicit in keeping hidden: 'I understand how those girls felt. The whole thing just made me want to take the girl and *shake* her. Maybe there's some kind of instinct about menstruation that makes women want to snarl' (p. 329). Animalistic imagery disguises the shame felt by Miss Dejardin (and the schoolgirls) towards what they work hard to keep concealed and controlled for the male's sake, again a product of the 'interior colonisation' of the mind that teaches women such concealment is necessary.[107] King has himself commented on the necessity for this concealment; when making amendments to the *Carrie* manuscript, King's wife pointed out that 'sanitary napkin dispensers in high schools were usually not coin-op [as the original manuscript detailed] – faculty and the administration didn't like the idea of girls' walking around with blood all over their skirts just because they happened to come to school short a

[104] Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror', p. 93.
[105] Kristeva/Creed suggest several: 'sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest' (Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 9).
[106] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 10.
[107] K. Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Avon Books, 1971) in Jane M. Ussher, *The Psychology of the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 69.

quarter'.[108] Though seemingly male-led, a faculty of both sexes expect to see menstrual blood hidden (evident in Miss Dejardin's horror at the bloodied handprint on her skirt). Therefore, having a scene in which the girls react with disgust towards Carrie would initially appear a reinforcement of this male desire, but having Miss Dejardin too express irritation ('dispassionately' asking Carrie to 'get up and tend to yourself' (p. 325)) instead signifies female complicity in maintaining control of this abject substance.

Carrie's period is – even according to another female – symbolic of entry into an adult life which will see her defined by her body and its reproductive ability. Miss Dejardin's assertion that Carrie was 'having hysterics' (p. 329) is demonstrative not of the upset Carrie experiences towards this scene, but her entry from the liminal space of puberty into an adulthood that will see her emotions constantly referenced against her body: 'the pathologizing of the menstrual cycle is one of the most powerful ways in which women's lives are defined and dismissed through their bodies'.[109] Hysteria is a term arguably so imbued with meaning as to render the word itself feminine, as Ussher suggests: 'hysterical became synonymous with feminine: the essence of hysteria was seen to be part of the essence of femininity'.[110] Woman's perceived propensity for hysteria (directly as a result of that 'matrix of all problems', the womb) is often taken up by King – he clearly uses the application of this hackneyed trait as the mechanism with which our stands of fundamentalism and the monstrous-feminine are pulled together.[111] In *The Dead Zone*, this corroborates with our ideas of Vera as defined by her faith; her hysterical displays are almost

[108] King, *On Writing*, p. 55.
[109] Ussher, 'Psychology', p. 40.
[110] Ussher, 'Psychology', p. 4.
[111] Intense emotional episodes have long been depicted as a solely female affliction, with the menstruating and menopausal body traditional symbols of the tendency – particularly within the male-dominated arena of 'official' medieval medicine – to view women as irrational and hysterical beings. For in-depth discussions on this tradition and its origins within the medieval medical text *The Malleus Maleficarum*, see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993) and Jane M. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine* (London: Routledge, 2006).

always in relation to discussions of her religion or motherhood, serving to attach monstrosity not just to extreme emotion but to extreme displays of devotion, too. One such discussion with Herb results in an outburst: '"*You think I'm crazy*!", she shouted at him, and her face crumpled and squeezed together in a terrible way' (p. 102). Given the etymology of 'terrible' as 'causing or fit to cause terror',[112] King again links female emotion and faith with the monstrous – if Vera's tears are 'terrible', she thus becomes a 'thing or being' capable of 'inspiring great fear or dread'[113] purely through displaying emotion. 'Terrible' because not in check, issues of control are again highlighted.

If the womb is the cause of such issues for women, however, it is certainly significant that Vera is still capable of the emotional displays explored above, despite being devoid of the organs that are the apparent source (and dictate the frequency and extremity) of said displays. Again exposing a core sociological contradiction attached to the feminine, Vera is also presented as hysterical for *not* having a womb. Her hysterectomy has left her bereft of her 'birth-giving function',[114] and when Johnny's accident presents a scenario in which she may be removed of her only claim to the pedestal of motherhood through his death, a sense of inadequacy as woman ensues – at least according to Herb. Vera turns ever increasingly towards her faith during times of emotional crises that also signal a threat to her stake in the feminine ideal. Taught that motherhood is her only route to such, '[she tried] to discover some new pipeline to Jesus and the eventual salvation of the only child she had been able to nurture in her substandard womb' (p. 94). Herb attempts to explain her lack of rational thought ('she's connected Johnny's accident with the Rapture, somehow' (p. 73)), and states that 'she always had strong ideas about religion and they got a lot stronger after her operation. Her hysterectomy' (p. 73). King clearly intends that her fundamentalist beliefs will

[112] "terrible, adj., adv., and n." OED [Online]. Available: http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/199563. Accessed 10 May 2013.
[113] "terrible", OED.
[114] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 50.

now transpose the womb as the source of both irrationality and monstrosity, making monstrous her lack of birth-giving function and the devotion which fills her void.

Arguably, Herb has been placed in the text as symbol of patriarchal thought concerning women. Often voicing outright misogyny, Herb mimics the views of the aforementioned male faculty who demand any overt displays of the feminine body be disguised and controlled. His embarrassment over Vera's reaction to Johnny's accident reinforces this. Such hysteria is clearly a step too far for Herb, with comedy lacing an otherwise tragic scene: 'Oh Christ, we sound like one of those weird off-off-Broadway shows […] He felt embarrassed for Vera, and for Sergeant Meggs, who must surely be hearing Vera, like some nutty Greek chorus in the background' (p. 60). Herb has himself just heard the news of Johnny's accident, but has time amongst the obvious worry to consider how they may both look to an outsider viewing the scene. Embarrassed, he clearly believes her reaction to be unwarranted, consolidated when he shouts '*Vera can you please shut UP*!' (p. 61). Yet, *his* reaction is portrayed as understandable through the tone of the narrative, as Vera here displays what is one of many episodes of exhausting religious babble. The narrative's justification of his reaction ensures Herb thus becomes a motif of the social complicity inherent in an acceptance of hackneyed feminine stereotyping, in which women are solely attributed to such displays but seemingly not permitted to indulge in them.

Herb's reactions to Vera often verges on cruel; despite his somewhat reluctant realisation that his wife's hysteria is perhaps warranted ('wasn't it Vera's right to weep for her son?' (p. 61)) he also communicates King's ulterior agenda. Herb appears to suggest that a mother has more right (over that of a father) to openly express concern for their son. Although initially a reinforcement of the mother/child bond, the significance lies in Herb's status as representative of patriarchal and fundamentalist ideologies, who advocate a distant fatherly role. Moreover, readers question whether Herb's attitude is a product of Vera's

devotion, or a motivation for Vera turning increasingly towards religion as the means with which to cope with the everyday. Vera is seemingly atypical in what looks like 'dissatisfaction with [her] relationship'.[115] 'Striving for a new life and a new role', Vera immerses herself in religious teachings as a reaction to her loss of identity: 'women are looking for new horizons during their menopausal years, looking for new ways of defining themselves'.[116] Instead, the contempt with which this is greeted by Herb prevents us from viewing this as a positive change, as fundamentalism/patriarchy condemns any acceptance of a role in which the shedding of identity as mother is paramount. The pause in which Herb adds on the specific type of operation Vera underwent ('it got a lot worse after her operation. Her hysterectomy' (p. 73)) suggests Herb feels the need to disclose to Sarah the specifics – a justification in Herb's mind of a decline in rationality directly linked to the removal of her reproductive ability. Herb here suggests that a removal of the God-given reproductive function renders Vera's role as woman defunct. Yet, Vera's attempts to cope are shot down; even though turning towards the same ideology, Vera must be categorised as irrational, hysterical and monstrous because attempting to forge a role which is detached from her reproductive capability. Keeping the feminine in check is Herb, belittling her new pursuits and the strength she finds in them.

Hormones and the reproductive system have been portrayed for centuries as the 'problem' with women. Prior to menarche and after menopause, then, women should theoretically be exempt from such ideology – yet, Vera's example proves that this is not the case. Pre-pubescent and post-menopausal females are rendered asexual because far removed from reproductive ability; protected by the innocence of childhood, this is not such a concern for young girls. The same cannot be said for post-menopausal women, who are seemingly not permitted to act upon sexual desire because no longer sanctioned under the veil of

[115] Ussher, 'Psychology', p. 128.
[116] Ussher, 'Psychology', p. 128.

reproduction. Rich concurs that 'women are permitted to be sexual only at a certain time of life [and arguably under certain rules], and the sensuality of mature – and certainly of aging – women has been perceived as grotesque, threatening, and inappropriate'.[117] This expectation is utilised in several ways by King. His older women are often made literally grotesque through age; we cannot forget that 'one of *The Shining*'s key images of horror is the living corpse of an elderly woman'[118] in room 217, terrifying because naked (evoking connotations of sex we are immediately repulsed by) and King here taps into the abject fear of decay and decomposition inherent in the 'long dead' (p. 278) corpse in the bathtub. Closer to death because ageing, King utilises the older female body alongside our abject fear of decay as representative of death. Despite its innate origins, this fear can still be traced to biblical tradition. For fundamentalists, the corpse must be avoided at all costs: 'within a biblical context, the corpse is […] utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul'.[119]

On the other hand, King may depict older women as autonomous beings no longer desiring or desirable. Herb's view of his wife is a case in point. In one scene, Herb takes in 'her faded brown bathrobe, hair up in curlers, some sort of cream hardened to a castlike consistency on her cheeks and forehead' (p. 58). Attempting to defy her age, Vera is portrayed as somewhat pathetic by Herb, who ensures we connect her 'faded brown bathrobe' with her faded youth. 'Castlike consistency' also connotes a mannequin-like, automatist image of Vera as something human which is 'perceived as merely mechanical'.[120] This is later compounded by the tears on her face, 'sliding over the smooth hard surface of the nightpack like rain on chrome' (p. 60). Despite her human display of emotion, then, Vera's

[117] Rich, 'Of Woman Born', p. 183.
[118] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 188.
[119] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 10.
[120] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009), p. 37.

grotesque body 'eludes coherent definitions and borders',[121] straddling the boundaries between the human and the robotic. This uncanniness is later reinforced by the 'trance-state'[122] she succumbs to ('It's a judgement! A judgement on the way we live! (p. 61)). Vera here becomes 'the quintessential "uncanny" body',[123] capable – because both familiar and unfamiliar – of inciting the ultimate form of horror. Therefore, though asexuality is not automatically conducive to disgust, King does makes it so – Vera is grotesque because likened to a machine or inanimate being devoid of any sexual desire. This denial of sexual desire to women over a certain age may therefore be the image of horror here.

Indeed, the pervasiveness of the image of monstrous-because-sexually-active older women permeates society, limiting women's experience: 'women can still experience sexual desire and sexual satisfaction even though they are no longer fertile, a fact which is known to most women, even though they may not proclaim it openly'.[124] Not proclaimed openly because dislocated from the only function religious and patriarchal ideologies assert is appropriate, women are taught to be ashamed of sexual desire when experienced outside these parameters. Control again becomes paramount – and while women are always taught to keep sexual desires at bay, indulgence of such desires past a certain age signals a loss of control we are taught to be disgusted by. The behaviour of the woman from room 217 of *The Shining*, for example, ushers in implicit condemnation from Watson concerning her sexual exploits – not just because she was sexually active, but because her lover was a young man: 'here's this woman – must be sixty fuckin years old – my age! – and her hair's dyed just as red as a whore's stoplight, tits sagging just about down to her belly button on account of she ain't wearing no brassy-ear' (p. 24). Defying convention not just through her relationship,

[121] Sarah Cohen Shabot, 'Towards a Grotesque Phenomenology of Ethical Eroticism', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 24 (2003), p. 66.
[122] Bennett and Royle, 'An Introduction', p. 37.
[123] Shabot, 'Towards a Grotesque Phenomenology', p. 66.
[124] Ussher, 'Psychology' p. 129.

this lady mimics Vera's attempts to defy her 'biological clock'. A lack of bra and dyed hair are starkly contrasted with the saggy breasts and 'varycoarse veins' (p. 24) Watson feels repulsed by. Yet, the 'kid' who accompanies her is himself portrayed as appalled by their relationship: 'after a few days it was getting harder an harder for him to grin, and God knows what he had to think about to get his pump primed by bedtime' (p. 24). All of these factors still revert back to notions of control, however; King casts this woman as repeatedly 'drunk as a coot' (p. 24) who later overdoses in the bathtub once her lover leaves. Our expectations surrounding alcoholism as a male disposition[125] combine with the woman's apparent suicide to suggest the ultimate loss of control – depicted as literally destructive via her demise. Here, we again find that King sets up a construction of the monstrous-feminine explicitly associated with age and control; superficially a reinforcement of unsympathetic depictions of older women, King instead exposes the origins of our horror within a destructively 'conservative'[126] notion of gender expectations. If control of the 'mute power of the flesh'[127] always falls far more heavily on woman, surely there should be a time in her life where this is no longer the case?

Moreover, *The Shining*'s Overlook can itself be read as an aging female structure, and therefore, subject to having the same expectations concerning the older female body projected onto her. Parallels can be drawn between the language Watson uses to depict the woman of Room 217, and the hotel itself. Watson informs Jack that he often 'be tinkering down here with this old whore' (p. 20), and warns that 'when [the boiler] whoops, those rooms get as cold as a frigid woman with an ice cube up her works' (p. 20). For Watson, the hotel is certainly gendered – his views also make clear from the outset that the Overlook is

[125] According to King, at least. There are few female alcoholics in King's fiction, despite a repeated return from King to this theme, and *The Shining* of course pivots around Jack's struggle with alcoholism. Indeed, although *11.22.63* features the rather conspicuous appearance of a female alcoholic (protagonist Jake Epping's wife), this is perhaps an attempt by King to break away from his somewhat overused character constructions.
[126] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[127] McCarthy Brown, 'Fundamentalism and the Control of Women', p. 176.

not simply horrifying, bur horrifying because female. The basement, for example, is a key site of horror: 'beastly place down here. Cobwebby. Gives me the horrors' (p. 23). Yet if, as Creed argues, 'woman is represented as monstrous […] almost always in relation to mothering and reproductive functions',[128] then it is significant that we are confronted with the internal 'plumbing' of the hotel so early on in the novel. This term has long been associated with the female reproductive system and, interestingly, there is clear evidence of the boiler's capacity for destruction: 'a steady blue-white jet hissing steadily upward channelled destructive force, but the key word, Jack thought, was *destructive* and not *channelled*' (p. 17). Such an image of destruction held within the plumbing of the building mirrors archaic notions of the womb as the embodiment of the contradictions attached to the female form; that the womb is viewed as both a safe and dangerous place is crucial in relation to the Overlook (Jack often finds respite from Wendy in the basement, but still fears it). Given that the womb has long been cited as the 'root of woman's 'deviances',[129] the governance attached to the womb-like structure of the boiler - and its resultant status as the driving force behind the Overlook's benevolence – is a provocative element of the novel. Although destructive, the boiler is also inefficient: 'this is an old baby. Got more patches on her than a pair of welfare overalls' (p. 20). Here, Watson's comment directly links inefficiency with age, drawing attention to the long-held belief that the ageing female body is somehow inadequate and inefficient because no longer able to perform its 'God-given' function of carrying and nurturing life. Both horrifying because powerful *and* inefficient, the boiler embodies many of the contradictions attached to the ageing female body.

Confusingly, the Overlook is also presented as brimming with energy. When the Torrance family stand looking out from the front porch, the scale of the hotel behind them renders their 'family portrait' odd (p. 108) and Jack experiences a queer sense of having been

[128] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 7.
[129] Ussher, 'Psychology', p. 3.

dwarfed by the hotel: 'it gave Jack a curious shrinking feeling, as if his life force had dwindled to a mere spark while the hotel and the grounds had suddenly doubled in size and become sinister, dwarfing them with sullen, inanimate power' (p. 109). This imagery evokes a sense of the hotel as somehow pregnant with energy and yet, instead of giving life, absorbs the family's will and turns it against them – making monstrous the natural act of childbearing. King has, in other novels, made similar allusions to the pregnant state as a motif of growing, harmful energy. In the scene in *It* in which Stanley commits suicide in the bath, the benevolent forces that have driven him to this act somehow sit in the water around him and are dripping from the tap: 'a drop of water gathered at the lip of the shiny chromium faucet. It grew fat. *Grew pregnant*, you might say'.[130] The italicisation not only highlights the connection between unappealing weight gain and pregnancy (itself a contentious issue for feminists) but also attaches a form of agency to the life inside which cannot be controlled, not dissimilar to how *The Shining*'s narrative teaches us to view the Overlook. As Creed's study demonstrates, there is a long tradition in literature and film of the pregnancy-as-horror scenario; the 'monstrous womb' becomes the representation of the 'quintessentially grotesque'[131] yet *natural* events of procreation, pregnancy and birth. The origins of this image lie, yet again, in biblical tradition. Creed notes that 'Leviticus draws a parallel between the unclean maternal body and the decaying body […] associated through childbirth',[132] and Kristeva posits images of birth as 'violent act[s] of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of the insides'.[133] This act of expulsion relinquishes the safety of the womb, violently realised in the tearing away from mother's 'insides' that is intrinsic to birth. However, birth also represents a loss of control for mother – she cannot dictate when birth will ensue, and horror that this 'grotesque' event will occur at any time

[130] Stephen King, *It* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986), p. 69.
[131] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 47.
[132] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine', p. 47.
[133] Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror', p. 101.

certainly originates within male anxiety towards female reproductive capabilities they do not want to be exposed to. By having Jack's narrative perspective indicate the ominously 'pregnant' Overlook, we are again exposed to a male fear of reproduction and the desire to keep the female body in check.

King also meditates on this by addressing conventional images of attractiveness and how a woman 'should' look. Highlighting the misogyny inherent in the idea of a woman *needing* to be physically inviting for a male is *Misery*'s Paul, whose impression of Annie as a site of blockage represents his physical block of sexual desire because of her appearance, as well as the suppression of her own sexual desire: 'there was a feeling about her of clots and roadblocks rather than welcoming orifices or even open spaces' (p. 450). 'Welcoming orifices' clearly references an invitation for a penis to enter, something Annie is devoid of. Immediately, and even through the haze of pain, Paul has summed Annie up and rendered her unworthy of sexual desire – conforming to conventional images of males whose lives are driven by sexual appetite. However, Paul's innate disgust is towards what her body *represents*; ultimately, a loss of control – and King again acknowledges expectations placed upon the feminine in relation to established social and religious scripts. Annie is generally capable of maintaining control over herself (because 'keeping up appearances is very, very important' (p. 491)) but this often slips, evoking many of the key images of horror throughout the text. Within fundamentalist discourse, the importance of repressing the realities of mortality – 'appetite, bodily finitude, and sexuality' – 'finds its object, once again in the "other"'.[134] In modern society, too, 'food is synonymous with desire. […] The desire to regulate food signifies the need to control desire. This obsession with food, with shape […] is about the need to control female sexuality. Control of female *sexual* desire'.[135] Annie's body shape ('she was a big woman who […] seemed to have no feminine curves at all' (p. 450))

[134] Hawley and Proudfoot, 'Introduction', p. 10.
[135] Jane M. Ussher, *Fantasies of Femininity* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 65.

corroborates with our immediate understanding of her as a binge-eater, evident in the merge of rich foodstuffs Paul detects on her breath: 'a dreadful mixed stench of vanilla cookies and chocolate ice-cream and chicken gravy and peanut-butter fudge' (p. 448). When he later becomes 'attuned to her moods, her cycles' (p. 485) Paul knows that after a high comes a crushing low, during which Annie binges on whatever she can find: '[…] more food splattered on her clothes […] Nearly one whole arm of her cardigan sweater was soaked with a half-dried substance that smelled like gravy' (p. 571). Ussher suggests that:

> The images of unwanted bulges and fleshy round stomachs that pervade women's magazines […] are metaphors for anxiety about internal processes which are out of control […]. The emphasis on the need to control and regulate the boundaries of the female body which pervades the pages of magazines is irrevocably connected to fears of the terrible consequences of unleashed sexuality, of the body without boundaries. It is not *fat* that is frightening but a female body without clear, firm boundaries.[136]

The suggestion of a body without boundaries evokes images of a return to primal, animalistic instincts, frequently evoked by King in relation to the feminine. Carrie's lack of control over her own image is represented by her 'bovine' appearance: 'she looked around bovinely' and had 'the eyes of a hog in the slaughtering pen' (pp. 323-4). Additionally, in Reiner's *Misery*, Annie clutches a stuffed toy pig while binging on ice-cream and watching bad television, flagging up the gluttony inherent in her pig-like consumption. Indeed, *Misery* pivots around the theme of consumerism – Annie's relationship with food mirrors her unhealthy consumption of, and investment in, the character of Misery Chastain; as the ultimate consumer of popular fiction that Paul tries to desert in his abandonment of the series, Annie's binges both of food and text represent the gluttony of consumerism. According to Paul this is an explicitly female affliction, whose necessity for supply and demand exacerbates our impression of a never-satiated, monstrous appetite: 'was she so different in her evaluation of his work from the hundreds of thousands of other people across the country – ninety percent of them women – who could barely wait for each new five-hundred page episode?' (p. 464).

[136] Ussher, 'Fantasies', pp. 65-6.

Borders and boundaries to female flesh must remain intact, lest women be rendered uncontrolled and thus a threat to society. Symbolic of the dangers of suppression of bodily desires, King makes Annie monstrous when she loses control – both of her sexual desires, her appetite and her flesh. As a patriarchal 'God', Paul's contempt is thus directed at the lack of control Annie demonstrates over the pure body given to her.

On this basis, our selected King works demonstrate an avid fascination with the female body; with how it looks, its capabilities and of course, its construction within the modern psyche as a source of horror. King's presentation of the monstrous-feminine (which does not remain within one 'category' but, rather, encompasses the various stages of a woman's life such as puberty, motherhood and menopause) mirrors the various arenas of 'horror' apparently elicited by the female body as she progresses through life. As per our considerations of the domestic and motherhood, however, external pressures from religion and society are always at work, dictating the expectations and ideals which inform our conception of the feminine as a source of horror.

Conclusion

Contemporary Culture as Horror

'Horror really is a dance – a moving rhythmic search. And what it's looking for is the place where you, the viewer or the reader, live at your most primitive level.'[137]

Indisputably, King's fiction has established a strong engagement with fundamentalism, utilising its restrictive parameters to maintain a dialogue between its 'conservative' conception of gender and how society still presumes to dictate appropriate behaviour for women. Demarcating religious extremism as a female affliction, King unites religion with the monstrous-feminine for horrific effect. Yet, our ambivalence towards King's women exposes archaic notions of the feminine ideal as sewn deeply into society. His texts subtly assert that – even in modern-day culture - a patriarchal God still decries what it means to be female; all-powerful, dangerous - and yet, still vulnerable to the exertions of control necessary to maintain a dominant male leadership. King's comment above reveals an awareness of the primitive nature of horror in modern culture, whereupon the veneer of civilisation we live under does little to temper our innate conceptions of horror; we are still terrified of what is (theoretically) un-terrifying.

Thus King's 'failure to transcend a gendering of […] otherness'[138] may be deliberate. His assertion of the feminine 'other' as horror points to an acknowledgement of the evasion within critical debate of just how complicit we all are in retaining the female within appropriate confines. We may even believe King to be the misogynistic one – at least until we recognise that, while his frequent nods to brand names and other 'cultural ephemera'[139] situate his novels within their precise socio-political origins, his images of horror do not remain within a specific context – always relevant and always horrifying, King posits our

[137] King, 'Danse Macabre', p. 18.
[138] Sears, 'King's Gothic', p. 12.
[139] Sacks, 'Lowbrow', p. 68.

veneer of civilisation as disguising what are essentially Medieval conceptions of gender that still permeate our everyday lives.

Taught that the frivolous horror genre cannot make political statements, King's methods of exposing gender inequality are suitably covert. Because extremist, the plight of the women in this study is not taken seriously, dismissed under the influence of a manic zeal which purports to excuse their monstrous behaviour as women and mothers. Yet, King implies that it is their efforts to conform which render them monstrous. Three core arenas of control are vital in detaining women within the confines of the biblical ideal, and our selected King novels pivot around why this control is so damaging to women. Domesticity, motherhood and the body are three areas that the feminine ideal is frequently attached and yet, they are also key to *how women control themselves*. Our selected novels reveal an awareness of the 'interior colonisation' of the mind[140] crucial to making this so; a loss of control over any one of these areas signals a sullied feminine identity, or worse, a contamination of the pedestal of womanhood ordained by God, making monstrous not simply the dictatorial regulation of women within religion, but within society generally.

This study has demonstrated how King turns an examination of the dangers of fanaticism into an interrogation of the norms upon which Western society is built. A grotesque product of social pressure, King's women set up the ultimate dichotomy in the readers mind; we seek her destruction because of the damage she causes to those characters we are allied to, but we also pity her. Nevertheless, King exposes our culpability in fuelling the image of the monstrous-feminine via our condemnation towards the behaviour she attempts as the 'ideal'. King thus succeeds in casting the very society that produces such 'monsters' as monstrous in itself and Danny Torrance's comment on the Overlook becomes

[140] K. Millett, 'Sexual Politics', p. 60.

laced with ulterior meaning; the 'inhuman place' creating 'human monsters' is, of course, Western society.

However, much of this agenda may be present unwittingly. King has acknowledged Yarbro's comment on his 'disappointing' construction of women as 'probably the most justifiable of all those levelled at me',[141] and the re-treading of thematic ground between *Carrie* and later novels does reinforce Sears's view that King cannot resolve the image of the monstrous-feminine intrinsic to this novel. Yet, this is surely the point. Via a 'vision of contemporary America as a spiritual realm that is out of joint and up for grabs',[142] King denounces the US as leader and moral beacon of the West. Losing its way politically and socially, it is little wonder that such a context is conducive to its peoples seeking to exercise control over that which can be controlled, unearthing the clandestine forms of guidance inherent in fundamentalism and committing the very actions the West perceives itself to be above. Mimicking other countries in which fundamentalism is rife,[143] the growing moral disrepute of the US is presented by King as not so far removed from the cultures it has long sought to oppress.

King's works are therefore littered with references to the 'spiritually bankrupt'[144] nature of organised religion –and interestingly, its similarities with US politics (an institution which competes for floor space within the US psyche, but also demonstrates a questionable moral fabric). A beacon for the theme of fanaticism that King repeatedly frequents, extreme devotion to this ideological framework is portrayed by King as equally grotesque. Moreover,

[141] Stephen King, 'The PLAYBOY Interview: Stephen King,' conducted by Eric Norden, *PLAYBOY Magazine* (June 1983) in George Beahm, *The Stephen King Companion* (London: Macdonald, 1989), p. 38.
[142] Ross Douthat, 'Stephen King's American Apocalypse', *First Things*, 170 (2007), p. 15.
[143] Indeed, a note of caution must be sounded against labelling fundamentalism a solely US faction of Protestantism. Fundamentalism can indeed be found in relation to any religion and, rightly or wrongly, it is fundamentalist followers of Islam which inform and imbue modern-day Western understanding of terrorism and war. Fundamentalism within Judaism is, too, increasing. For more insight into the relationship between fundamentalism and gender within other organised religions and countries, see the following collection of essays: John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *Fundamentalism and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[144] Egan, 'Sacral Parody', p. 127.

the US political scene also constructs the 'other' as that which represents opposing ideals and must be curtailed; whether within ever-present factions of society (women) or upon the world stage.[145] Therefore, the 'small-scale oppression' evinced against the women in King's novels can be read as symbolic of a wider interest in how and why we seek to oppress that which threatens. The 'other' is always a product of our own making and thus, King may be suggesting that we are only terrified because there is something fundamentally wrong with how we – individually and as a collective – construct horror. If we can condemn the respective agendas of organised religion and US government – as the tone of King's texts encourage – we become alert to the 'other's origins as product of a society that has lost its way. Certainly, there is a gaping hole in King criticism in which the author's presentation of the 'spiritually bankrupt'[146] nature of religion and politics should sit. Indeed, if we can move away from dismissing King's works on the basis of its horror and popular fiction origins, we may find a compelling social critique the prolificacy and depth of which remains to be attempted by other authors.

[145] Assertions of control against a perceived, threatening 'other' has long categorised the military intervention which defines the US political agenda, and King makes frequent references to the Vietnam and Cold Wars, Nixon and Watergate, and (more recently) 9/11 and terrorism as indicative of the problematic assertions of power towards 'othered' nations as a form of existential reassurance. For an excellent analysis of the West's 'depend[ence] for its structural integrity on an ongoing conflict with an excluded outsider' within a literary context, see William Stephenson, '"A Terrorism of the Rich": Symbolic Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* and J. G. Ballard's *Super-Cannes*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 48 (2007), pp. 278-294. For US international relations and the evocation of Gothic scripts by George W. Bush to define the 'ineffable and potently violent and cruel forces [which] haunt the civilised, human world', see Richard Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of International Relations: Ghosts, Monsters, Terror and the Sublime after September 11', *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), pp. 621-643.

[146] Egan, 'Sacral Parody', p. 126.

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